

Faith and Practice Committee Report to Illinois Yearly Meeting 2013

The Faith and Practice Committee has met four times, held one conference call, and conducted workshops with four local meetings since the 2012 sessions of ILYM.

Much of our attention this year has been devoted to preparing a section on meeting for worship. We made a draft of this text public a year ago, and since then have made numerous revisions based on comments received from individuals and at workshops with Northside, Downers Grove, Duneland and Evanston Meetings. The revised text is attached; we now propose that it be approved for a three-year provisional period, to expire at the 2016 sessions of Illinois Yearly Meeting. (The section on worship groups and preparative meetings, approved in 2011 for a five-year period, will expire at the same time.)

In the past we have always requested initial approval for five-year provisional periods. The committee is concerned that if we continue this practice, then after the last section is provisionally approved, we will have five years of inactivity before revising it for final submission and preparing the book as a whole for publication. At the Fall 2012 session of the Continuing Committee, we asked for guidance in this matter, and received their approval to begin submitting text with a request for just three years' provisional approval. Our hope is eventually to shorten the provisional period down to a single year.

In addition to the section on meeting for worship, the committee has worked this year on three additional sections: one on Friends testimonies; one on the Light Within and related topics, including Quaker views on Jesus and the Bible; and one on death, bereavement, and memorial meetings. The first two of these are now complete enough to make public, and are attached to this report. We ask that Friends read these texts carefully and convey comments and suggestions to the Faith and Practice Committee.

The committee has felt greatly the loss of our longtime and beloved member Larry Stout, who died in Tenth Month 2012. Larry was the last of the original members of the Faith and Practice Committee still to be serving on it, and hosted our meetings for many years. We miss his quiet wisdom, insight, and experience. Although no one can take Larry's place, the committee has been strengthened this year with the addition of two new members, David Shiner and Sarah Pavlovic, bringing the committee back to a workable size of five members.

The Faith and Practice Committee was initially appointed in 1992, with the goal of completing the project in five years. The committee has been proposing text for approval since 2003. Our current estimate is that it will take at least another six years to complete the book.

Approved sections and circulating drafts are available on the ILYM website. As always, the committee welcomes comments and suggestions on these texts, as well as recommendations for additional topics to be covered.

Attachment 1: Meeting for Worship (Proposed for 3-year provisional approval)

Introduction

Friends in Illinois Yearly Meeting engage in "waiting worship," in which we gather silently to enter into communion with God and with one another and to seek God's help and guidance in ministering to our own spiritual needs, those of the meeting community and those of

the wider world. Meeting for worship begins when the first worshiper enters the room. As Friends enter the meeting room, they seek to still their minds, leaving behind the concerns and activities of their daily life, and to focus inward and enter a period of expectant waiting. After a substantial period of silence anyone present who feels led to speak by the Divine Spirit may rise and do so. Friends speak spontaneously as led rather than composing a message in advance of coming to meeting for worship. This vocal ministry is typically followed by a period of silence to deepen the worship and allow those present to take in what has been said. When enough time has passed another Friend may feel led to speak. Sometimes the entire meeting may pass in outward silence. The meeting ends with the shaking of hands.

Preparing for meeting for worship

Preparation for the next meeting for worship begins with the closing of the previous meeting. Friends seek God outside of meeting for worship by engaging in personal reflection, prayer or meditation, journaling, and reading the Bible or other spiritual literature. Friends who engage in such spiritual practices may more readily enter worship prepared in mind and spirit. Taking time from the busyness of life to experience even brief moments of awareness of God's presence sows the seed for deeper spiritual engagement. Meetings are encouraged to provide opportunities for Friends to share the spiritual dimensions of their lives, by organizing retreats, workshops, spiritual formation groups, or other gatherings.

While engaging in spiritual practices prepares one to enter more readily and deeply into worship, so too do the things one does immediately prior to coming to meeting for worship. Allowing sufficient time to travel to the meeting place helps one arrive in a calm and unhurried state of mind. Parents may want to help their children prepare for the experience of worship or educational programs at meeting. Friends may hold the meeting in prayer, read the Bible or other spiritual literature, or simply quiet their minds and turn inward. Reading the newspaper, attending to media, or dealing with the stresses of secular life immediately before meeting for worship may distract one from spiritual matters and interfere with the capacity to perceive accurately the promptings of God's Spirit.

Beginning meeting

So Friends, when you come together to wait upon God, come orderly...: the first that enters into the place of your meeting, be not careless, nor wander up and down, either in body or mind; but innocently sit down in some place, and 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... sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light; a few that are thus gathered by the arm of the Lord into the unity of the Spirit,— this is a sweet and precious meeting, where all meet with the Lord!...In such a meeting, where the presence and power of God is felt, there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here: and this is the end of all words and writings — to bring people to the eternal living Word.

Alexander Parker, 1659

Except in small meetings held in homes, worship begins once the first person enters the meeting space. As more Friends enter they do so silently, joining the worship. This practice

allows others to enter already experiencing a sense of the living silence. After the meeting has settled into worship, a query or short passage may be read aloud by a designated individual.

Centering

As the meeting gathers into worship, we strive to release the events of the week and the stirrings of our minds, moving into an inward stillness where we unite with Friends in communal worship.

For some Friends the process of “centering,” of spontaneously emptying the mind is difficult. Some have engaged in various practices to still their minds so that the Divine Presence can be felt, heard and obeyed. The practices that work for one may not work for another; however, the practices that are described here have been found to be helpful in centering at the beginning of worship. Positioning the body in a restful yet alert position is a starting point. Many Friends sit with their feet on the floor and with hands in their lap. Some Friends keep their eyes open; others close them. Few people can achieve inward stillness immediately but find instead that they must release impediments gradually. Some pray; some hold each person in the room in the Light; some engage in self-examination; some contemplate mental images and others may silently repeat a passage. Through these means, one loses the complexity of thought, focuses inwardly and enters a period of expectant waiting. The particular technique is less important than is the creation of a condition of being fully present. Even a few Friends who are centered can enable others to more readily reach that state of consciousness as they remember that they are already in the presence of God. Those at a meeting for worship generally experience a deepening of the quality of the silence as the meeting settles.

When distractions occur during meeting for worship, individual Friends or the community as a whole may need to work to re-center on the movements of the Spirit. Distractions may take the form of outward disturbances or of unsettling thoughts or feelings. When dealing with distractions, it is helpful to turn back to a place of expectant waiting rather than trying to suppress the distracting thoughts.

Communal worship

For 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, 1676

As the worship deepens those present open themselves as a faith community to the Spirit of God. We seek a direct relationship with God, to discern what God is calling us to do. We still our minds to open our understanding as freely as possible from the obscuring effects of our own rationalizations, emotions and ego. The analytic mind gives way to an awareness of the workings of the Spirit. It is within this corporate experience that a sense of unity with those worshipping and with the Spirit is felt.

This discernment is a communal, collective process. Activities such as reading or journaling can easily distract one from full participation in this process. All in attendance have a responsibility for the quality of worship. We do not appoint clergy to conduct the worship or deliver a sermon; rather we humbly listen together for how God leads us in worship.

Vocal ministry

Whatever a man does or says or thinks in matters pertaining to divine worship must be done under the special impulse, inspiration, and influence of God... For, in order to perform true public worship properly, every worshiper ought to listen with the deepest quietness of mind to the internal strivings of the divine Spirit in his heart; so that as the Spirit prompts, leads, and assists he will either prophesy or pray or render thanks, or perform some other duty of divine worship. And in this way not only he but also the worship offered by him will be both pleasing to God and altogether beneficial to the worshipper himself and to the entire Church of God.

Robert Barclay, 1675

Any worshipper present in meeting may experience the influence of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of God leading them to speak. It is important when feeling led in this way to discern whether the call to speak is authentic. A rightly led message advances the spiritual life of the community and of its individual members. The speaker serves as an instrument through which the Spirit ministers; the message pulls others into the stream of the Living Waters; deepening the worship.

There is no set procedure or inviolable rule for determining when or how to speak, but the following advices can be helpful:

- What one speaks in meeting for worship arises out of one's own experience. When speaking of spiritual matters, share based on what you know first hand.
- Avoid self-involvement and a focus on your own personal or emotional needs. Speak as ministry to the meeting rather than as therapy to yourself.
- Ministry is of a religious or spiritual nature. While a religious life has political and intellectual consequences that may give rise to vocal ministry, messages are best delivered in a manner that emphasizes their spiritual grounding. Friends are tenderly cautioned to avoid giving messages that only promote a political agenda, rally people to a cause, or present an intellectual system of theology.
- Messages may continue a thread from ministry delivered earlier in a meeting. However, it is usually best to avoid responding directly to a previous message. Give other speakers the benefit of the doubt that they are speaking from a leading. If their contribution seems wrong to you, consider what there might be of value in it, rather than correcting or debating.
- An individual may discern an authentic message that is solely for himself or herself rather than for the assembled body. The individual should rest in the knowledge that such messages are an invaluable part of the worship experience even though not verbally shared.
- Friends often experience a call to speak as something that may be resisted but cannot be held back. A Friend who feels impelled to speak should do so. Some Friends find that the call to speak may be accompanied by trembling or a quickening of the heart.
- Often Friends don't have a well formed message as they begin to speak but rather have a few words or phrases that may shift in focus as the ministry is being shared. This results from speaking spontaneously as led rather than crafting a message in advance. Friends are encouraged to speak even if the message is not fully composed.
- Friends are tenderly advised to speak loudly and clearly enough to be understood. Except in very small meetings it is normal to rise when speaking in order to heard.

- A period of silence traditionally follows vocal ministry. Others who wish to speak are urged to wait until the meeting has had time to absorb the previous message back into the silence.
- When many Friends offer vocal ministry with little silence between messages, a Friend may rise and remain silent as a way of enabling the meeting to re-experience waiting worship.
- A person does not generally speak more than once in a given meeting for worship.
- Messages are best stated simply.

Some Friends engage in vocal ministry with some frequency; others find that they are seldom called to speak. Both those who engage in vocal ministry and those that do not are equally called to active participation in the meeting. The absence or presence of vocal ministry is not in itself a reflection of the quality of worship. Many meetings are marked by a deep stillness yet there is no vocal ministry. Those who provide silent ministry help the meeting to reach or maintain a state of focused, attentive waiting on the presence of God.

The gathered meeting

In the Quaker practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when an electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, and a quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits with a super-individual Life and Power — an objective, dynamic Presence which enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens in us depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground.

Thomas R. Kelly, 1940

When the presence of the Spirit is deeply experienced during a particular meeting for worship, the meeting is sometimes called a “gathered” or “covered” meeting. In a gathered meeting, one experiences a strong sense of being united with others and with God. The meeting may be silent, or Friends may deliver messages that parallel one’s own stream of thought or speak to a similar concern or question. Some Friends describe the experience of a gathered meeting as being immersed in the Living Stream. When leaving a gathered meeting, Friends often feel a deep sense of grounding and connection with God.

Closing meeting

Ideally, the meeting ends when the gathered Friends collectively feel a sense of conclusion and release. While in present day practice, the time of a meeting for worship is often scheduled for an hour in length, there may be times when there is a sense that worship needs to end earlier or continue longer. The clerk of the meeting, a member of the worship and ministry or other similar committee, or some other designated person is given responsibility for discerning when the meeting is free to conclude and signals this by offering to shake hands with a nearby person. Others present then shake hands with those around them unless it is strongly felt that the meeting needs to continue.

There are several different practices that may follow the end of meeting for worship. In some meetings there is a time to express joys and sorrows; in others a time to make prayer requests. In larger meetings, a member of the worship and ministry or some similar committee will introduce himself or herself so that Friends who have concerns or questions may share them

after the rise of meeting. Some meetings ask all those present to introduce themselves; others ask that newcomers or those who have been absent for a period of time introduce themselves to the body. As a final practice, most meetings allow time for announcements. These may be given by the individual most involved in the activity or event to be shared. In other cases, announcements may be provided to the clerk or other designated individual to read. Following announcements there is often a time for social exchange and an opportunity to get to know newcomers.

Logistics

In many meetings, Friends gather for worship on once a week on First Day (Sunday). A number of meetings also hold mid-week worship.

Some meetings hold worship in their own meetinghouses. Other meetings hold worship in a rented space, still others in their homes. The location should be carefully selected to avoid distractions which may make it hard to center. Regardless of the space in which meeting for worship occurs, the general layout of the room is similar: chairs or benches are generally arranged so that people are facing one another.

Someone may be designated to greet people as they arrive. Many meetings have pamphlets available for newcomers that briefly describe the form of Quaker worship. In some meetings, those arriving late enter the meeting room as soon as they arrive; in other meetings, there is a designated space where latecomers gather and begin to center. This practice serves to minimize disruptions to the deepening silence. Then, at a designated time, often fifteen minutes into worship, they enter the meeting room. Even if this is not the practice of a particular meeting, latecomers should refrain from entering the meeting room while someone is offering vocal ministry.

Children are welcome to attend the entire meeting for worship. Often, children attend either the first fifteen minutes of meeting or the last fifteen minutes. Such decisions are made with consideration of the experience that the meeting seeks the children to have. As children mature, they are encouraged to participate in the entire meeting for worship.

Dealing with problems in meeting for worship

There are times when the behavior of a particular individual interferes with the quality of worship. Sometimes a Friend may engage in frequent vocal ministry, the content, length or tone of which is disruptive. To address such situations, the worship and ministry or other similar committee should consider how to proceed. In making a determination as to how to respond to this person's behavior, consideration is given to the degree to which it affects the quality of worship. The meeting should take care to hold the disruptive worshiper in the light and to treat her or him tenderly and with compassion. Meetings would also do well to consider how they would deal with an unexpected instance of disruptive behavior before one actually occurs. (See worship and ministry committee, pp. xx-xx.)

Queries on meeting for worship

For the individual:

- How do you prepare for meeting for worship?
- Do you arrive at meeting on time and promptly enter the meeting room so as not to disturb the worship which has already begun?

- Do you come to meeting neither determined to speak nor determined not to speak?
- Do you wait to speak until you feel led?
- Do you speak when you feel led?
- How can meeting be a source of help when you feel disconnected from the Divine?
- Do you carry the experience of meeting for worship into your daily life?

For the meeting as a whole:

- What does your meeting do to increase the depth of meeting for worship?
- Does the quality of vocal ministry in your meeting contribute to the quality of worship?
- Do Friends in your meeting find that they are spiritually refreshed, enriched and sustained by meeting for worship?
- How does the ministry nourish the spiritual growth of your meeting community?

Attachment 2: Testimonies (Presented for comments and suggestions)

Among the distinctive Quaker principles are those known as the testimonies. These are values that Friends hold corporately, and which are reflected in our witness to the world.

The testimonies are the expression of our communal experience of the Light Within and our commitment to its fruits. We demonstrate this commitment in our outward lives: in our dedication to peace and simplicity, for example, and in our greater love for each other in “the things that are eternal.” Living in accordance with these testimonies is not a matter of assenting to specific religious tenets. Rather, it reflects the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and actions.

Be faithful in those testimonies of life and light, against all those things that have come up in this night of apostasy from the light, life and power of God.

George Fox, 1675

For the sake of convenience and clarity, modern Friends generally list the testimonies under separate topics, such as “peace” and “equality.” While this practice has its uses, it should be understood that the testimonies complement each other and form a cohesive whole. This is why the testimony of integrity (“wholeness”) is often the first one cited in modern Quaker literature, as wholeness characterizes the testimonies taken together.

The testimonies of 21st-century Friends today are strikingly similar to those of our forebears in many ways, distinctively different in others. All of them have evolved over time and, in accordance with Quaker belief in “continuing revelation,” will continue to do so. Learning to live in accordance with them can be challenging. We often fall short, but we continue to strive.

I don’t regard the testimonies as rules to walk by but ideals to aim for, as guides and reminders of how we should try to live....We have not attained perfection; we are still on our way.

Kathleen Douglas, 2000

Integrity

Perhaps the most fundamental Friends testimony is that of integrity. This testimony calls us to a way of life aligned with the will of God, reflecting our devotion to truth, honesty, authenticity, and wholeness. We endeavor to become whole within ourselves, and to make our actions reflect our words and beliefs. We strive to hold to a single standard of truth, saying what we mean and doing what we say.

Let your 'yea' be yea and your 'nay' be nay; anything more than this comes from evil.
The Gospel According to Matthew 5:37

Early Friends refused to swear oaths, believing that oaths implicitly devalued statements that were not made under oath. Quaker tradespeople did not negotiate the price of their goods, instead offering them to the public at a fair price. Gambling was also rejected as lacking in integrity. Friends today continue to live in accordance with these views, reflecting a commitment to God's Truth as known through the Light acting within us.

The Inner Light does not lead men to do what is right in their own eyes, but that which is right in God's eyes.

Ellen S. Bosanquet, 1927

Peace

Friends are widely known for our efforts to bring about a more peaceful world. We shun violence in word and deed, holding that war is inconsistent with God's will.

We...utterly deny...all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever. This is our testimony to the whole world... [T]he Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the Kingdoms of this world.

Friends' Declaration to Charles II, 1660

Early Friends steadfastly refused to participate in wars, preferring imprisonment and persecution to harming other children of God. More recently, Friends who have refused to fight have often requested to serve in some humanitarian way, and many have done so. Quakers have been, and continue to be, active in issues such as conscientious objection, war tax resistance, and relief and reconciliation efforts.

Mindful of the presence of evil in the world, Friends attempt to counter that evil by nonviolent means while bearing in mind that the perpetrators are also children of God. We have ministered to those on all sides of any conflict in accordance with our belief that God "sends rain on the just and on the unjust," as Jesus declares in the *Gospel According to Matthew* (5:45).

The Quaker peace testimony is not simply a denunciation of outward violence, but also an affirmation of the power of inner peace. When we act from a spirit of pure love, participation in war and violence becomes impossible. As Quaker founder George Fox wrote in response to having been offered a military commission, "I told them that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars." Fox understood that being inwardly centered makes it possible for us to attain the peace that the Holy Spirit wants for us. The closer we are to

achieving this condition, the better able we are to cultivate peace in our family, our workplace, our community, and the world.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you....Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid.

The Gospel According to John 14:27

Simplicity

The Quaker testimony of simplicity denotes an inward centeredness that is responsive to the Divine. As we become centered, we are drawn away from the complexity and clutteredness of secular life and led toward the purity and simplicity of truth as revealed by the Light Within.

Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center – a life of unhurried peace and power. It is simple. It is serene. It takes no time but occupies all our time.

Thomas Kelly, 1941

Friends do not have a set procedure for reflecting inward simplicity, but we have found that outward adornments can be impediments to achieving and maintaining it. Early Friends believed that wearing unadorned plain dress helped free them from vanity. Few contemporary Friends wear traditional plain dress, but we continue to believe that some measure of detachment from material possessions and worldly aspirations helps us attend to the Light.

The increase of business became my burden, for though my natural inclination was toward merchandise, yet I believed Truth required me to live more free from outward cumbers and there was now a strife in my mind between the two; and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who graciously heard me and gave me a heart resigned to his holy will.

John Woolman, 1774

Friends regard church rituals and material trappings as hindrances to being fully attentive to God's word. We gather in unadorned meeting houses and wait in holy silence for the Spirit to guide our worship.

Equality

The testimony of equality is based on Friends' belief that there is that of God in everyone. We regard outward differences between people as insignificant in comparison with the spiritual equality of all human beings. Quakers have always regarded men and women as equally worthy in God's eyes.

The power and spirit of God gives liberty to all, for women are heirs of life as well as men.

George Fox, 1676

Early Quakers refused to address their secular superiors by honorifics or titles, nor would they bow or doff their hats to them. These countercultural practices, which resulted in the persecution of 17th-century Friends, have informed our tradition ever since that time. Historically

speaking, Friends accepted and upheld the equality of people of different races, classes, and sexual orientations earlier than most of the rest of society.

The testimony of equality does not imply that everyone has the same talents, but rather that each of us is equally a child of God, blessed with gifts that are different from and complementary to those of other people. When we unite as a meeting community, our diverse gifts unite to serve that community.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians 12:4–6

Community

The testimony of community is central to Friends' practices. We worship together in order to be receptive to God's Light, and we minister to all members of the meeting community.

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations against another; but praying for one another and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Penington, 1667

Friends' orientation toward community stands in contrast to the individualism that characterizes our contemporary secular world. We interpret Jesus' injunction to love one another as calling us to share concerns and practices with each other. Our collective attention to God's Word, undertaken corporately in Meeting for Worship, serves as the foundation of the faith community to which Friends aspire.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

The Gospel According to Matthew, 18:20

As Quakers, we believe that we are called to be responsible and accountable to each other. We respond to the needs of our meeting community in many ways. These include pastoral care and the formation of clearness committees, in which an individual Friend is held in the Light by fellow worshippers who seek God's will for that Friend.

A Quaker community offers loving support, guidance, comfort, and inspiration to all of those who become a part of it. It also serves as a foundation for our witness to other communities of which we are also a part.

Attachment 3: The Light Within and its Religious Implications (Presented for comments and suggestions)

Introduction

The Society of Friends encompasses a wide variety of beliefs and perspectives, but perhaps the most distinctively Quaker religious concept is that of the *Light Within*. Also frequently called the "Spirit" or "that of God in everyone," the Light is a Divine presence within each of us: a manifestation of God in all people. Identified by early Friends — and still by many

of us today — as the living Spirit of Christ, the Light serves as a moral guide, a comfort in times of need, a spur to action, and the Seed from which inward spiritual transformation can grow.

Light is that which makes visible, and the first function of the Light Within is to make clear to us our true spiritual nature, laying bare what we may have hidden from ourselves, whether good or bad, and showing us ourselves as we really are. For some, this may mean seeing one's true worth after years of imagined worthlessness; for others, it may mean recognizing for the first time one's own capacity for evil. For all, gaining a more honest and complete understanding of oneself is a crucial step in spiritual growth.

The Light clarifies not only our own inward nature, but also the path we ought to take. The Light informs and excites the conscience, turning us away from what we know is wrong, and toward what is right and true and just. The Light is the source of authentic “concerns” — the persistent, growing sense we sometimes feel that some moral or spiritual issue requires our attention and discernment; and of authentic “leadings” — the sense that one is impelled by Divine will toward a particular course of action.

By this light it hath pleased the Lord to give me the distinction of things inwardly in my own heart. The Lord hath shewn me by it evil and good in my own heart, and taught me to chuse the good, and refuse the evil. So that as my eye hath been turned to this light, and kept to this light, I have known and walked in the way of life; for the power which hath appeared in this light, hath created me anew, made me a child of light, and taught and caused me to walk in this light, as God is in the light.

Isaac Pennington, 1681

The Light can be unsettling but is ultimately a source of inward peace and comfort, both in the assurance it provides that God is always with us, and in the clear conscience it brings to those who do what they know inwardly to be right. Friends have a special calling to build peace in the world; but true peace is rarely built by those who are dominated by turmoil in themselves. Those who would bring peace out to others must find it also within. It is by turning to this inward source of reconciliation and forgiveness that we find the foundation for outward action.

This I told them was their first step to peace, even to stand still in the light...

George Fox, recounting events of 1652

Discerning the Light

Attending to the Light Within requires effort, and a careful discernment of what in ourselves is truly of the Divine Spirit, and what instead is simply the expression of our own egos, desires, or assumptions. The Light endows all people with the capacity to perceive and enact what God would have us do, but our exercise of that capacity is frequently imperfect.

The experience of Friends has been that the Light is most accurately and reliably recognized from a state of inward calm and quiet. It is for this reason that in our meetings for worship, including our business meetings, we try to empty our minds and put aside anything which might mask or distract us from our perception of the Light: the stresses and worries of daily life, the bitterness of resentment or anger, the diversion of idle fantasy, the ambition for personal advancement, or whatever else might so fully occupy our thoughts as to crowd out what we most need to see. We should hesitate to accept as the Light's guidance any impulse which does not persist as these things are set aside.

Give over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that, and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion.

Isaac Penington, 1661

Discerning the Light is most effective when pursued communally. Not everyone is led to the same actions, and we cannot expect that what the Light makes clear to one person will always be made clear to everyone; but checking one's perceptions against the understanding of a broader spiritual community provides an invaluable anchor and partial safeguard against a false sense of Divine leading. The Light does not contradict itself; when Friends' understandings of what the Light requires are not just different but incompatible, this is a sign that more discernment is needed.

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light of Truth be faithfully followed, unity will result. "The Light itself," says Thomas Story, "is not divided, but one and the same entire, undivided Being continually." The nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another, just as the spokes of a wheel approach one another as they near the center.

Howard Brinton, 1952

Friends have often found that living as the Light leads us requires personal sacrifice. Early Friends faced severe persecution for their beliefs, and even in modern times Friends have frequently found themselves in confrontation with the state or other powerful interests. Friends who face no such dangers may still find that the lit path conflicts with their natural desires to pursue comfort, pleasure, wealth, or prestige. Sacrifice by its nature involves hardship, but sacrifices to which one feels deeply called can also be spiritually enriching.

The natural Mind is active about the Things of this Life; and, in this natural Activity, Business is proposed, and a Will in us to go forward in it. As long as this natural Will remains unsubjected, so long there remains an Obstruction against the Clearness of divine Light operating in us; but when we love God with all our Heart, and with all our Strength then in this Love, we love our Neighbours as ourselves; and a Tenderness of Heart is felt toward all People...

John Woolman, 1772

Friends should not feel troubled if the Light is difficult to discern, or if they do not feel clearly led to any particular course of action. Our first responsibility is simply to wait and to listen. No more can be asked than a sincere effort to discover and live out what one knows inwardly to be right. Even those most experienced in cultivating the spiritual life report long periods of drought; our part is to keep the ground prepared so that the Seed may sprout in its own time.

The first gleam of light, ‘the first cold light of morning’ which gave promise of day with its noontide glories, dawned on me one day at Meeting, when I had been meditating on my state in great depression. I seemed to hear the words articulated in my spirit, ‘Live up to the light thou hast; and more will be granted thee.’

Caroline Fox, 1841

A Religion of First-Hand Experience

A religion based on discerning and responding to the Divine Light within each of us must be a religion of first-hand personal experience. Friends have long held that religion known only second-hand, through accounts in books, intellectual systems of theology, the mediation of clergy, or in any other way than personally and directly, is of comparatively little value — and indeed can be harmful, if it displaces the more necessary work of opening ourselves to the inwardly transformative power of the Spirit.

And then [George Fox] went on, and opened the scriptures, and said, ‘The scriptures were the prophets’ words, and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed, and had it from the Lord:’ and said, ‘Then what had any to do with the scriptures, but as they came to the spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of light, and hast walked in the light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?’ &c. This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly, we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly; and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, ‘We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.’

Margaret Fell, recounting events of 1652

Through much of our history, Friends objected even to the performance of psalms and other hymns, as “singing the condition of David” — that is, as expressing the spiritual state of King David, presumed author of many of the psalms — which would be a poor substitute for discovering and expressing one’s own spiritual state. Few Friends object to hymn singing nowadays, but we continue to recognize the importance of personal authenticity in religious expression, and the danger of putting vicarious religion in the place of real experience.

To say that religion must be known first hand does not mean that hearing the religious perspectives of others is of no profit; on the contrary, this can be of immense value. But the words of others have an effect only to the degree that they strike a respondent chord in ourselves and so lead us to experience something on a personal level. Other people may give a clearer articulation to what we know only dimly in ourselves, or may present it in a new way or from a novel perspective, or may lead us to see elements of our own views as inconsistent with what we know more deeply to be true.

Conversely, in our own religious speech and conduct toward others, we may expect to be helpful only if what we say and do finds an echo in what the Spirit already testifies to them inwardly, or to use George Fox’s phrase, if it “answers that of God” in them.

...be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one;

whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you: then to the Lord God you shall be a sweet savour, and a blessing.

George Fox, 1656

We cannot hope to call forward the Light in others unless our own communication with them flows from the Light in ourselves. Indeed, Quakers have traditionally held that all religious speech, whether ministry or prayer, in meeting for worship or elsewhere, should be under the direct and extemporaneous influence of the Spirit, and not simply recited from memory or composed by the “natural intellect”:

The worship, preaching, praying, and singing, which we plead for, is such as proceedeth from the Spirit of God, and is always accompanied with its influence, being begun by its motion, and carried on by the power and strength thereof; and so is a worship purely spiritual...

Robert Barclay, 1678

Diversity of Belief

Our paramount concerns in religious life are to properly attend to God’s Light in ourselves and all people, discern what we are called thereby to do, and respond to that call as led, both as individuals and as a community. A sincere effort in all these things leaves room for a wide variety of theological perspectives. Issues of religious doctrine are of secondary importance at best, and at worst serve as a divisive and harmful distraction from the real business of spiritual engagement and building a more just and peaceful world. Partly for this reason, we do not require assent to any specific list of religious tenets as a condition of membership in the Religious Society of Friends, nor do we as a body formally affiliate with any organization which requires such assent.

Humanity and Purity, Bowels and Holiness, they are the pure Religion and undefiled in God’s Sight, in his Account; not Creeds but Practice, not Profession tho’ of true Words, but Experience and good Living.

William Penn, 1692

Just as faith without works is dead, so too is a merely intellectual belief in religious ideas without the quickening power of the Spirit. Instituting a standard of belief in a religious organization encourages the false view that belief by itself has some redemptive or salutary effect. But the Light, properly attended to, effects a far more thoroughgoing and deeper transformation than simply coming to believe a doctrine.

For by our works we must be tried, and not by a profession founded on belief or faith; nor by faith only; for belief never saved the soul, except when it has become an operative belief—till the soul is led to condescend to those things that are pointed out to it by the light, and to work by it and with it...

Elias Hicks, 1826

In any organization in which a confession to specific articles of faith is required, some individuals will inevitably feel pressure to make such a confession, whether they are inwardly

convinced of its truth or not. Such requirements tend therefore to undermine the integrity of the members, and to promote dishonesty and hypocrisy. Friends value authenticity above conformity, holding that any expression of religious faith should arise from the operation of God's Spirit within, not from external expectations.

And, dear friends, be faithful in what you know, take heed of making a profession of what you are not, and so you be found dissemblers before the Lord; but keep low in meekness and patience, standing in the will of God in all things...and then you shall be brought into a possession of what you have but had a profession, and find the power of what you had but in words, which is hid from all professions in the world, and is revealed no other way, but by the pure light of God dwelling in you, and you in it.

James Nayler, 1653

Many Friends have felt that some important elements of religious Truth resist formulation in words. Any statement of faith to which Friends were expected to subscribe would therefore provide an incomplete and distorted view of what we really regard as most important.

All Languages are to me no more than dust, who was before Languages were, and am come'd before Languages were, and am redeemed out of Languages into the power where all men shall agree...

Fox, Stubs, and Furley, 1660

Although there is no specific list of doctrines to which we expect our members to assent, this does not mean that there are no specifically Quaker religious ideas. Far from it: Friends have developed a rich system of Quaker religious thought over a period of more than 350 years, and we encourage participants in our meetings to familiarize themselves with it and consider its principles carefully. Nor can it be said that we regard every conceivable religious idea as an equal expression of the Truth which God reveals in all people. In the clearness process for membership, meetings may consider whether an applicant's views are broadly compatible with the perspective of the meeting community as a whole and of Friends more generally. But the utmost caution must always be exercised not to let a concern for doctrine divert us down a divisive and lifeless path.

For the better part of Theology, the real Knowledge of God and of the things of His Kingdom, is more an affair of the heart than of the head, and is largely independent of formulated creeds....Our contention is not against Theology in the abstract, so far as it is really practical and useful, but against elevating it above, or putting it in the place of, Religion; against the notion that dogmas, framed either by individuals, however eminent, or even by synods and Churches, are to be held as binding upon communities, or upon the minds of individual men; and finally against the bigotry and tyranny of the idea that *any* special form of intellectual belief is necessary for the salvation of the soul.

Francis Frith and George H. Braithwaite, 1884

Christ and Christianity

Early Quakers understood themselves to be engaging in "primitive Christianity revived" (to use William Penn's phrase), and through most of our history, Friends were united in placing

the person and teachings of Jesus Christ at the center of their spiritual life. This is no longer universally the case. To varying degrees in our different meetings, many of us draw as heavily from other spiritual traditions as from Christianity, or understand the Light Within and other Quaker religious concepts in ways which are largely independent both of Christianity and of other traditional religions. Not a few of us approach such matters from a primarily or entirely non-theistic perspective. Many also of us are committed Christians—and diverse in our understanding of what that entails.

Yet underlying this diversity is a deeper unity, and a commitment to shared values and common practice, even if not to uniform belief. We have found by experience that we reap more spiritual fruit through love and care for one another, through forbearance and forgiveness, through service and community, than we do through a vain attempt at achieving a homogeneous understanding of Jesus' role in religious life.

It may nevertheless be useful and interesting to Friends of all perspectives to have some familiarity with historic or traditional Quaker thought on Christ — not as a normative standard of belief, but as an aid to understanding the original motivations for some of our concepts and practices, as a reference point in understanding our current diversity, and as part of the common heritage of the Religious Society of Friends. Many Friends have also found — sometimes to their surprise — that engaging with the perspectives of earlier generations of Friends serves to advance their own spiritual growth, or to significantly alter their understanding of Christianity.

But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do; then, Oh! then I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.' When I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.

George Fox, recounting events of 1647

As understood by Fox and other early Friends, Christ is found first and foremost by turning inward. They perceived the Light Within to be the Spirit of Christ, working in and through all people to guide us and redeem us into the life which God would have us live. Present within us at first perhaps only as a small seed, Christ is strengthened in us as we hearken to such guidance, remaking us anew. The voice of Christ within teaches a life of love, forgiveness, humility, and compassion; and turns us away from all that is contrary to such a life.

What is the *sum and substance of the true religion*? Is it not love from a principle of life? Is it not a travel out of the enmity of the creature into the love of God? Doth not the light of life spring in the love, and gather into the love? Doth not Christ, revealed in the heart, and leavening the heart with the favour of life, teach love to enemies, to bear with them in love, to seek them in love, to forgive them in love, to pray for them in love, to wish good to them, and wrestle with God for mercy towards them, even while they are hating and persecuting?

Isaac Penington, 1663

In contrast to many of their Puritan contemporaries, who understood salvation as an external payment of our debts by Christ, early Quakers saw redemption in Christ's inward work transforming and purifying the spirit.

Here is light, here is life, here is righteousness, here is peace, here is heavenly joy, here is the holy power, springing and bringing forth their fruits, and precious operations and effects in the heart; and here is assurance of the love of God in Christ for ever, and that God will never leave nor forsake that soul which is joined to him, and abides with him in this seed; but it shall be kept by the power of God, through the faith that springs from this seed, unto perfect redemption and salvation.

Isaac Pennington, undated

It is not always clear from the writings of seventeenth century Friends how they understood the respective roles of the inward operation of Christ in the spirit and the outward, "historical" crucifixion and resurrection in effecting salvation. This issue became a major point of schism in the 1820's. In keeping with our general openness to diversity of belief, most of us are now content to regard such questions as matters of individual faith.

Friends and the Bible

Just as we are diverse in the roles we ascribe to Jesus in our spiritual lives, we are diverse also in the ways we use and interpret the Bible. There can be no doubt that to George Fox and the other founders of Quakerism, the Bible was deeply important, highly valued, and pervasively influential. Their writings are rich in scriptural allusions, and they clearly took themselves to be advancing the same religion as advocated by scripture, taken as a whole and rightly understood.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that early Friends favored a "Bible-based" religion. Friends have always held that religious belief and practice ought to be based on what God reveals inwardly through the Light. Fox and other Friends claimed that what God taught inwardly could frequently be found also in the testimony of scripture, but it is the Light, not the Bible, which serves as the foundation.

This I saw in the pure openings of the light without the help of any man; neither did I then know where to find it in the scriptures; though afterwards, searching the scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that light and spirit which was before the scriptures were given forth, and which led the holy men of God to give them forth, that all must come to that spirit, if they would know God or Christ, or the scriptures aright, which they that gave them forth were led and taught by.

George Fox, recounting events of 1648

Early Friends believed that the scriptures were written under the guidance of the Light Within, and that therefore there could be no contradiction between scripture, rightly understood, and what the Light reveals to us now. While this may seem to imply that one can "test" apparent revelations by checking whether they are consistent with scripture, Friends have often held that such testing is problematic, because the correct interpretation of scripture — at least for the purposes of spiritual discernment — can itself be reliably garnered only under the guidance of the Light. Without confidence that we are discerning accurately what God reveals inwardly and directly, we can have no confidence in our interpretation of scripture. Indeed, we would have no

reason to trust the scriptures at all if not for a respondent spark in ourselves which finds itself echoed in them.

Friends believe that Divine guidance is freely available to all people, to guide our speech and actions. The idea that the scriptures were written under Divine guidance therefore does not accord them a unique status in human history. Revelation continues down to the present day; there can be no closed canon. Many of us feel that other writings, including some from very different religious traditions, express the Light no less than the Bible.

We now recognize that the writings of the Bible reflect to some extent the varying personal experiences and cultural perspectives of its authors; just as our own speech in meeting for worship, though offered under a sense of Divine guidance, may be colored by our limited experience and understanding. The Bible is perhaps all the more useful for expressing a variety of different conceptions of God and the relation between God and humanity, including some from historical and cultural contexts quite far removed from our own. Yet underlying this variety we perceive a deeper unity: a single Spirit that finds expression in many ways.

Quakerism and Other Religious Traditions

There is a Principle which is pure, placed in the human Mind, which in different Places or Ages hath had different Names; it is, however, pure, and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of Religion, nor excluded from any, where the Heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes Root and grows, of what Nation soever, they become Brethren in the best Sense of the Expression.

John Woolman, 1760

Friends hold that the Light Within is present in all people; not just Quakers or Christians. We claim no monopoly on religious truth, and welcome the insights we may gain from other religious traditions.

The *Humble, Meek, Merciful, Just, Pious* and *Devout* Souls, are every where of one Religion; and when Death has taken off the Mask, they will know one another, though the diverse Liveries they wear here, make them Strangers.

William Penn, 1682

What is truly important in spiritual life may be found among the adherents of many different outward faiths. This is not to say that all religions are equally true or that all spiritual paths are equally legitimate, for it seems clear that different faiths make different and incompatible claims. But discerning and responding to the Light Within does not require adherence to any particular tradition or organization. In a deeper sense, all those who humbly and sincerely commit themselves to do what they know inwardly to be right are united: on a single path and in a common community, despite all superficial diversity.

The *Church* [is] no other thing but the *society, gathering, or company of such as God hath called out of the world, and worldly spirit, to walk in his Light and Life*. ...under this *church* and its denomination are comprehended all, and as many, of whatsoever *nation, kindred, tongue, or people* they be, ...as become obedient to the *holy light* and *testimony of God* in their hearts, so as to become sanctified by it, and cleansed from the evils of their ways. ...There may be members therefore of this *catholic church* both

among *heathens, Turks, Jews*, and all the several sorts of *Christians*, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart, who...being upright in their hearts before the Lord, ... are by the secret touches of this *holy light* in their souls enlivened and quickened, thereby secretly united to God...

Robert Barclay, 1678

Just as spiritual Truth is not confined to any one outward religion, so neither is any outward religion immune from error, even of the most egregious kinds. History provides innumerable examples of atrocities and crimes committed in the name of religion. Friends may be proud of the ways Quakers over the centuries have worked for justice, peace and equality, but we are far indeed from being able to claim a spotless record. Many of the accomplishments for which Quakers are best known were the result of long efforts by small minorities of Friends who had to labor hard against resistance from other Quakers. Our attitude to other faiths must be one of openness and humility, and we must be diligent in seeking out and uprooting the seeds of injustice, both in our individual beliefs and practices, and in the institutional structures of the Society of Friends.

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ; at which I was grieved; for His name to me was precious. I was then informed that these heathen were told, that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ; and they said among themselves, 'if Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant.'

John Woolman, 1772

Rites and Ceremonies, Days and Times

Friends have made an honest effort to take that last step which the Reformation did not take. They have wished to exhibit a genuinely *spiritual* religion, washed clean of superstition and magic. They have wanted every step and stage of salvation and of worship to be *a living process*. They are afraid of phrases which are supposed to have some *sacred* efficacy. They are anxious not to have officials who belong in a special class and are assumed to have peculiar powers that others lack. They do not recognize places or buildings as having any inherent sanctity. They count only on those operations which are truly ethical and spiritual; that is, those operations which produce in the person *a new spirit and a new power to live by*. The religious life, for them, is witnessed by a new creation. There are no substitutes for life; there is nothing that can take the place of a momentous spiritual event.

Rufus Jones, 1927

For Friends, the essence of spiritual life is to attend diligently to God's promptings within, and respond as led. In our experience, a faithful response to such leadings will serve the practical goals of cultivating peace, forgiveness, justice, and loving care — in ourselves and in the world. The performance of rites and ceremonies is largely extraneous to such goals, and Friends have generally regarded ceremonial performance as inessential or even harmful to religious life. Seventeenth century Friends took the unusual step of discontinuing the rites of baptism with water and the Lord's supper, which had been part of Christian practice from the

earliest times. Most Friends today continue to view such ceremonies as separable from, and much less important than, the spiritual realities they represent.

It is perhaps not humanly possible to live a life completely free of ritualized behavior, and by modern anthropological standards Quaker practices such as meeting for worship would surely qualify as rituals. We do not attempt to eliminate everything in our conduct which serves to mark certain activities as religious. But we keep the level of ceremony low, in order to concentrate on what is truly vital.

Akin to all these is the religious stimulant, the opium and the alcohol of the soul's desire. Such were the Mysteries, such are the Sacraments. It is better to wait for the rhythm. Our souls grow stronger with patience. In no region of our faculties is artificial sensation, unnaturally stimulated, good for us as a habit.

J.W. Graham, 1920

Friends have often pointed out that to those who experience the spiritual reality which a ceremony symbolizes, the outward form becomes superfluous; and to those who have no such experience, it is pointless: a dead form. But rituals often seem much more powerful than we would expect of dead forms and superfluities. A well-designed ritual, like well-composed music, can induce a vivid sense of connection with the Divine. This power gives us all the more reason to be cautious about rituals. Authentic connection with the Divine is not a mere feeling, however vivid, but a regeneration of the spirit, bearing real fruits of love, compassion and forgiveness. An artificially induced feeling may or may not have such a regenerative effect; it is important not to let the feeling itself become one's primary goal in spiritual practice.

The whole of life is a sacrament. The worst, the poorest and meanest, of us as well as the bravest and the noblest before our brief day darkens, have broken divine bread. If we believed it wholly, for others as for ourselves, we should have peace. Even now, the measure of our peace is our belief in it, and our forgetfulness of it is the measure of our unrest. To forget it utterly is despair. That the daily bread of human existence, with all its hope and joy, its agony and failure, is broken to men by no blind fate, but by an Eternal Wisdom that is Eternal Love,—this is the underlying faith that saves us from madness. But it is a faith that must be proved, and striven for, and actualised, hour by hour and day by day. We must grip it hard, if we are to recognise God's sacraments as, one by one, they enter into our experience.

May Kendall, 1902

Just as the performance of ceremonies can produce feelings of Divine connection without real inward improvement, so also can the celebration of religious holidays and visits to religiously significant places. Such celebrations and visits may also create the misleading impression that sacredness is a matter of calendars and geography, rather than of inward spiritual condition and its outward expression in a harmonious way of life. For most of our history, Friends did not celebrate holidays; and while simple celebrations of Christmas and Easter have now become common, we continue to maintain that all days are equally holy in the sight of God. We may feel special attachment to our old meetinghouses and other places connected to Quaker heritage, but do not regard them as more holy than the world in general, all of which is consecrated to God's purposes.