

Worship

Introduction

This chapter considers five customary forms of worship used by Friends. To focus on form is to focus on the outward, but in fact these practices were developed to make the largest space possible for the inward. They work against our habits of mind and our pleasure in external stimulation. They work to surrender initiative to the Spirit. Sitting with several people in a designated place for an hour or so will not produce a meeting for worship, but in Friends' experience, gathering together, waiting quietly, and listening for that "still small voice" is an essential part our life together in the Light. Any form can be empty of Presence, and the Presence can fill any form it wishes. Friends in Intermountain Yearly Meeting worship without a program to open the individual and the community to God's immediate and creative possibility.

Friends' practices and processes rest on social and mystical^[1] understandings of human nature: the individual always stands simultaneously in relation to the Spirit and to others, and it is through the Spirit that we are most intimately related to our fellow human beings. Remembered and looked for, the Spirit can gather us and lift us into creative unity.

Friends have applied the term *worship* to several practices in which Friends, singly or together, try to stand in the Presence. This chapter considers the meeting for worship, worship by individuals, worship in the home, the meeting for worship for business, and worship sharing. For many Friends, service is a form of worship as well, especially when a concern has been laid upon them. Although service is an intrinsic part of Friends' practice, nevertheless this chapter looks at those forms of worship in which we step aside from our daily lives and focus ourselves inward.

In 1676, Robert Barclay wrote, "True and acceptable worship of God stems from the inward and unmediated moving and drawing of his own Spirit. It is not limited by places, times, or persons."^[2] Later, he adds,

We have certain times and places in which we diligently meet together to wait upon God. . . . We consider it necessary for the people of God to meet together as long as they are clothed in this tabernacle. We concur with our persons, as well as our spirits, in believing that the maintenance of a joint and visible fellowship, the bearing of an outward testimony for God, and the sight of the faces of one another are necessary. When these are accompanied by inward love and unity of spirit, they tend greatly to encourage and refresh the faithful.^[3]

Friends try to find a way to live in constant awareness of the "moving and drawing" of the Spirit. Each form considered in this chapter represents a possibility for a meeting of spirit, body, context, and purpose. Each practice has its own way of opening participants to a sense of the "inward and unmediated" Presence. Each practice requires of its participants a certain kind of attention, a certain decorum, and a certain discipline.

Meeting for Worship: Listening and Waiting

Silence is the bowl in which ministry is served.

Leslie Stephens, 2005

Friends find the center of their life together in the meeting for worship.

Although Friends worship any time the Spirit moves them to, they set aside specific times and places to gather for worship as a community. Meeting for worship is a public act. "Bearing an outward testimony for God" has not always been legal, but Friends have never held meeting for worship in secret. All present may participate fully, as the breath of God blows where God wills. Even when Friends disowned people^[4], the disowned were not excluded from worship.

Meeting for worship begins the moment someone—anyone—begins to "center down." Gradually the silence enfolds all present in communion with the Spirit and each other. In the silence, we journey into that inward stillness where even our thoughts are gone, and we wait. Some Friends, responding to the movement of the Spirit, may be led to speak out of the silence. The meeting ends when someone, usually preselected, determines that the meeting has ended and greets his or her neighbors by shaking hands. In our busy times, this generally happens about one hour after the start of the meeting for worship, although those who are sensitive to the movement of the Spirit do more than simply check the clock when bringing the meeting to its official end.

In Silence ...

The earliest Friends waited because they believed that the only worship that counted was worship that God actively inspired—the inward and unmediated moving and drawing of God’s own Spirit of which Barclay speaks. Although Friends today understand that there is merit in different forms of worship, our unprogrammed^[5] practice teaches us to be open and vulnerable in the face of the Spirit.

In worship we have our neighbors to right and left, before and behind, yet the Eternal Presence is over all and beneath all. Worship does not consist in achieving a mental state of concentrated isolation from one’s fellows. But in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life, within whom we live and move and have our being.

Thomas Kelly, 1938 ^[6]

Friends have never regarded [worship] as an individual activity. People who regard Friends Meetings as opportunities for meditation have failed to appreciate this corporate aspect. The waiting and listening are activities in which everybody is engaged and produce spoken ministry which helps to articulate the common guidance which the Holy Spirit is believed to give the group as a whole. So the waiting and listening is corporate also. This is why Friends emphasize the ‘ministry of silence’ and the importance of coming to meeting regularly and with heart and mind prepared.

John Punshon, 1987 ^[7]

Out of the Silence . . .

In the stillness of the meeting, the Spirit brings us messages. Sometimes these messages are for us alone; sometimes they are meant to be spoken. A spoken message may be meant for the community. It may be intended to reach the heart of a single person. It may be the seed for further ministry, or it may stand alone.

People who give vocal ministry seldom know the precise purpose of their message—they only know they must speak. Conversation among Friends about vocal ministry often turns quickly to the signs one follows in making a decision about speaking and to the inadequacy of any signs to confer certainty. In the first years, Quakers “trembled before the Lord,” and many still tremble today. Some feel a specific kind of anxiety, a jab in the ribs. Others know it is time to speak when the message arrives with perfect calmness. For some, there is an analytical cast to their final decision, whereas others say, “If I have to ask, the message isn’t for sharing.” Waiting is often involved; if the meeting ends before the right moment comes, perhaps the message was not meant to be given. The message may come again and again with greater insistence each time. Some Friends have bottled up the urge to speak only to have someone else in the meeting give the same message.

As the message is spoken, the experience continues. One’s voice may change. The body may feel different. Friends have stood up to speak having no idea what they were meant to say. Others have begun with a carefully worked out plan and ended with words coming from somewhere else. Sometimes the command also comes to stop. Ministers often speak of the sense of peace that descends on them when they feel their ministry has been given according to the Spirit. They also speak of the discomfort that comes when they have outrun their guide.^[8] Sometimes ministers hear from others that they were touched by the words they spoke; it is well to remember then that the ministry was the Spirit’s—not theirs.^[9]

Vocal ministry requires practice. Recognizing the signs is a matter of discernment. According to Patricia Loring, “Discernment is the faculty we use to distinguish the true movement of the Spirit to speak in meeting for worship from the wholly human urge to share, to instruct, or to straighten people out.”^[10] Be ready to be flexible! Writing of his own growth as a minister, Lloyd Lee Wilson^[11] recalled a time when he moved from being a rock in meeting (“Here I am, Lord, but you are going to have to blow me away before I speak today”) to trusting God and his own relationship with the Spirit enough to become something like a fruit tree (“My Master has planted me in good soil, pruned me, and sent the sun and rain in order than I might bear fruit—here it is”).

After someone speaks, the meeting returns to silence, waiting for further movement of the Spirit. Without the active support of prayerful silence, speech in meeting is disconnected from the Spirit and not rooted in the community.

Inappropriate ministry is another topic that comes up in conversation among Friends about vocal ministry. Each Friend seems to have his or her own example, so we remind ourselves that the Spirit does not

always tell us what we want to hear, speak to us in pleasing tones, use correct grammar, or speak through people we like. As John Punshon says,

. . . we have to train ourselves to overcome our personal likes and dislikes and treat everything said in meeting with uniform seriousness and consideration. That is part of Friends' spiritual discipline and cannot be compromised with. It is not at all easy, but it is unavoidable. We need time and calmness to reflect on what we have heard. Only when we have taken it into ourselves shall we be in a position to decide whether or not it is from God.^[12]

Children in meeting for worship bring special joys and distractions. Within Intermountain Yearly Meeting, there are various ways of fostering their participation. The most common approach splits the children's time between attendance in meeting for worship and a children's program of religious education: some meetings start with the children present in meeting whereas others bring the children in towards the end of meeting. However it is arranged, participation in meeting for worship is just as important for children as it is for adults.

Meeting for worship can be a time for healing. It *must* be a place of safety, a place where one can grow and take chances and where everyone's life is nurtured, for the Spirit is not always a comfortable companion. The Light brings risks and challenges as well as balm for the soul. It is not for nothing that the first Friends spoke of being convicted before they were convinced. Although it is the special charge of the Committee on Ministry (variously named Ministry and Oversight, Ministry and Counsel, Worship and Ministry, and so on) to foster, support, and provide guidance for those who speak in meeting for worship, the care and responsibility for the health of the meeting belongs to the whole community. One cannot learn to walk if laughter and scorn follows any misplaced step.

Worship by Individuals: Seeking Depth and Knowledge

The history of Friends is not a history of people who waited for First Day to arrive before waiting on God. Stories of the sudden experience of the Divine fill the literature of mysticism and of Quaker lives. Stories of life-long seeking can be found there, as well.

A spiritual practice is a vital part of our lives.^[13] When the only experience we have of silence comes in meeting for worship, our individual needs can so dominate our awareness that we are prevented from being part of the community as we worship. As we deepen our connection to the Spirit through individual practice of spiritual disciplines, our participation in the meeting for worship also deepens. The experience of Friends suggests that the form of the discipline is less important than the fact of it: there is no single path to follow. The movement of the Spirit has not been limited to a flow into Europe out of the Middle East; nor are our exercises limited to those found in that religious history. As in everything else, the Light guides us to a useful practice.

Worship in the Home: Nurturing Spiritual Discipline

From its inception, the Religious Society of Friends has waited for the Spirit in community and maintained that its highest experience is the experience of the Spirit uniting the whole community. Worship in the home affirms the sense of family, which finds its wholeness in and through the Spirit. In these busy times, when even First Day mornings can seem overscheduled, worship in the home provides an opportunity for quiet intimacy under the care of the Spirit.

In the past, Friends' families worshiped together in the home on a regular basis, and this practice is continued in many households today. This tends to be the most programmed of the various forms of worship covered in this chapter, in part because it provides training for children through adult example. Religious passages may be read and hymns may be sung, providing seeds for centered worship. However the worship begins, it ends with a time of silence and ministry, providing a safe place for children to experience the movement of the Spirit and to share their voices.

Meeting for Worship for Business: Discernment

Friends, keep your meetings in the power of God, and in his wisdom (by which all things were made) and in the love of God, that by that ye may order all to his glory. And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and continue awhile quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God Almighty may be felt among you.

Discussions of Friends' processes often get twisted up in "nots," and the meeting for business is no exception: we do not vote, we do not debate, we do not follow parliamentary procedures, and so on. How much harder is it to speak positively! The meeting for business is a meeting for *discernment*. At the meeting for business, the community gathers under the guidance of the Spirit, attempting to make decisions in unity. [\[15\]](#)

All of the curiosities of Friends' practice stem from this: the community is led by the Spirit, and the Spirit works through the whole community. Imagine a knotty issue as a complicated work of three-dimensional art. What is obvious at first glance to one person is not at all evident to someone else. So gradually we walk around it, different ones of us bringing aspects of the work to the attention of the community, and as we do, we come to a fuller understanding. We undertake the walk together, we consider each aspect together, and as our understanding grows, so does our ability to work together for a solution. The Light shines from all directions. Our knowledgeable Guide whispers in our ear, pointing out new vantages. We become closer, more of a community, more able to put our guidance into action together.

The community gathers . . .

In Intermountain Yearly Meeting, Friends generally do not quibble over questions of voice and vote: members and attenders are equally welcome to participate in business meetings. Business is conducted by and entrusted to those who are present at the business meeting. Although it would not be fair to schedule discussion of an issue when a person known to be especially interested in the problem is out of town, objecting to a discussion based on what one thinks someone who is not present might say is problematic.

under the guidance of the Spirit . . .

Listening for the Light in each person's words and waiting for guidance makes the business meeting an act of worship. Only when Friends are aware that they are functioning in the Divine Presence does the Quaker method achieve its goals. Thus, it is important that each business meeting begin in the stillness of worship so that its character will pervade the transaction of business. As a reminder, many Friends prefer to call this meeting the "meeting for worship for business."

An agenda does not preclude guidance: what is openness in worship can be lack of focus in business. The agenda is prepared by the clerk beforehand in consultation with the various meeting committees where they exist, but issues and concerns may be raised in various ways. A committee may bring a report, with or without a recommendation for action. If there is a recommendation, it often takes the form of a proposed minute. Individuals may bring concerns as well. Although it is best to approach the clerk ahead of time and ask for an item to be included on the agenda, an issue may be brought directly to the meeting. It is always helpful to be able to explain to the meeting the kind of action that is being requested and the background for it, including options that were considered and discarded. After a concern is presented, the meeting holds the concern in the Light.

Some people don't believe it's the truth until they hear it coming out of their own mouths.

Pat Sheldon, overheard after an especially long business meeting

Speaking in the meeting for business is ministry just as much as it is in meeting for worship. Among Friends, speaking begins with listening. Before speaking, we ask ourselves if the point has already been addressed. Does our point carry the meeting forward? Are we aware of any undercurrents? (One may joke about God's lack of concern for the color of the meetinghouse door, but if color is a source of dissension, then God surely is interested.) Have we been listening? When one is heard the first time one speaks, one does not feel the need to go over the same ground.

As a matter of etiquette, speakers wait to be recognized and address their remarks to the clerk or presenter. Sometimes the pauses between speakers become so short that a reminder from the clerk or a request from the floor for silence may be necessary. When silence is broken again, Friends take care as they proceed that the concerns voiced before the silence have been heard. Periods of silence throughout the meeting help assure a sense of the presence of the Spirit and aid the clerk in gathering the sense of the meeting.

making decisions in unity.

Unity is possible because the Light of Truth shines in some measure in every human heart. Friends come to a meeting for business expecting that the Spirit will lead the assembled body to unity. The commitment to search for unity depends upon mutual trust, implies a willingness to labor and to submit to the leadings of the Spirit, and grows as members become better acquainted with one another.

When Friends make a decision . . . they are seeking the will of God in a particular matter.

They have found the most reliable guide to that will to be the sense of the meeting.^[16]

The most important duty of the clerk is to judge the sense of the meeting. This may be in the form of a minute, or it may be to wait and consider the concern at another time. The clerk must remain neutral, listening to all, aware of those who are hesitant, sometimes checking the long-winded, and ready to remind Friends to speak out of the silence.

The most important duty of Friends attending meeting for business is to seek Divine guidance while exercising self-discipline and self-control. Friends are urged to be mutually forbearing and concerned for the good of the meeting as a whole, rather than to press a personal preference. Time is allowed for deliberate and prayerful consideration of the matter at hand. Everyone must want to reach a decision and be open to new understanding. When the Light finds its voice, it can be helpful to the clerk that Friends say quietly, “That Friend speaks my mind.” (On the other hand, when spoken early in a discussion, the sentence may bear the character of voting.)

The sense of the meeting . . . can only arise out of a membership which has given itself over to seeking the will of God and has prepared itself spiritually for the search. It may be that some present have not yet come to that condition of seeking. It may be that some have come seeking that their own will be done—sometimes for excellent reasons. It may be that they come with a leading from God which is quite true for themselves but not a leading for the meeting as a whole.^[17]

The sense of the meeting is not always unanimous. It is possible for an individual to recognize that the meeting is ready to go forward with a decision even though he or she is not. At this point, Friends have a number of ways of proceeding. First, if one feels deeply that the decision is not in the Light, one has an obligation to say so, “standing in the way” of the decision and thereby preventing the meeting from going forward. (On very rare occasions, meetings have decided that an objector was being willfully obstructive, and proceeded anyway. This, too, is a decision of the meeting and is so unusual that mention of it is made in the minute.) Second, one may accept the meeting’s conclusion in the place of one’s own—often the meeting leads us beyond ourselves. In some cases, one may “stand aside” from a decision, allowing the meeting to go forward while reserving judgment. Meetings should be slow to accept this action on the part of an individual, preferring to achieve unity rather than to go forward without the whole community. This is especially true if several people choose to stand aside—then perhaps the sense of the meeting has been misread. Third, Friends who don’t want to stand in the way of their community have been known to stay away from a business meeting when they believe a decision would be made that they could not accept. Friends should be very careful about taking this step because it deprives the meeting of their participation and deprives them of an opportunity to have their perceptions challenged.

There is power in unity. Decisions made through a process leading to unity carry the conviction and commitment of the whole community. We risk losing this power if we aim simply for efficiency. When we avoid conflict, when we get along by going along, we lose the ability to work whole-heartedly together. When a meeting tries to force an issue and lets itself get away with it, it runs beyond its Guide. Friends do not make decisions according to the will of the majority nor are Friends’ decisions blocked by the will of the minority. The Religious Society of Friends is led by the Spirit.

Worship Sharing: Building Community in a Fragmented World

In today’s world, in which people are mobile and divided by distance and circumstance, the unconscious familiarity with one another that underlies communities that have shared lives for generations is for the most part long gone. Worship sharing takes us intentionally beyond appearances and prejudices and often leads to profound connections between participants. When we join in with open minds and hearts, worship sharing can be as gathered as any meeting for worship.

Worship sharing is a small-group exercise. Eight members is a good number. With fewer than six present, individuals may feel too exposed; with more than ten, the process can become cumbersome. The

composition of worship sharing groups differs depending on their purpose. There is usually a facilitator, and often there are queries to consider. (When worship sharing takes place in a larger gathering, the context and purpose of the gathering may be sufficient to provide a focus. Worship sharing is confidential—what is said within the group stays within the group and may not be repeated elsewhere without the specific permission of the original speaker. In many cases, due to the nature of the sharing, permission should be obtained from the whole group.

The facilitator reviews with the participants the characteristics of the worship-sharing format and may read one or more queries. After settling into silence, participants speak.

Participants may speak as they are moved, or sometimes, depending on who is present, the participants may be asked to speak in turn. This is a good approach when the group has not met before and is unfamiliar with worship sharing, or when there is a wide mix of ages. It is helpful to the facilitator and the group if a person who wishes not to speak to a particular query “passes.”

Sharing is based on personal experience. Each contribution is heard and is framed in silence. Having addressed a query, one does not speak to it again until everyone has had a turn, and rarely then. This process is intended to free participants from any need to consider a response or plan a contribution while someone else speaks. When one speaks, one resists the temptation to ask followup questions of a previous speaker, contradict or debate a point, give advice, or practice one’s diagnostic and therapeutic skills. Any of these might illuminate the previous speaker’s sharing, but they allow the speaker to avoid sharing at all.

Although participants are mindful not to take more than their share of time while speaking, when the worship-sharing session is on a schedule it is important that the planners allot sufficient time to it. The facilitator brings the group to a close when the appointed time has passed. Closing the session may include handshakes, hugs, and further silence.

The Stillness at the Heart of Things

As we look at Friends’ worship practices, we often hear characterizations akin to: “It is not a debate.” We are not trying to impose our will or our ideas on the community. We work together because the Spirit works in and through all of us. In all forms of worship, we open ourselves and still ourselves so that the noise of our busyness does not overwhelm that other voice we so long to hear. The Spirit unites us. We live best when we live within that Spirit.

^[1] One definition of mysticism: “. . . the belief in or reliance on the possibility of spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect.” *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

^[2] Robert Barclay, *Barclay’s Apology in Modern English*, Dean Freiday, ed. (Newberg, Oregon: The Barclay Press, 1991), p. 239.

^[3] Barclay, *Apology*, p. 243.

^[4] When Friends were viewed as a suspect cult, they began to “disown” the unfriendly behavior of people who might be seen as Quakers by the outside community. Later, disownment became a tool of social control. It is rarely used today.

^[5] Friends today are divided in their forms of worship. Some, including meetings in Intermountain Yearly Meeting, practice the silent meeting. Other meetings have pastors and follow a program when they worship—thus the distinction between “programmed” or pastoral meetings and “unprogrammed” ones.

⁶ Thomas R. Kelly, *The Eternal Promise*, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1988), pp. 44-45, as quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 2.36.

^[7] John Punshon, Unpublished writing, 1987. Quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice*, 2.37.

^[8] For instance, John Woolman wrote: “I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind and endeavored to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the True Shepherd. And one day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting, but not keeping close to the divine opening, I said more than was required of me, and, being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks without

any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could take satisfaction in nothing. I remembered God and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity upon me. I then felt forgiveness for my offense, and my mind became calm and quiet, being truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. And after this, feeling the spring of divine love opened and a concern to speak, I said a few words in meeting in which I found peace: this, I believe, was about six weeks from the first time; and as I was thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure spirit, which inwardly moves upon the heart and which taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock.” *Journal*, quoted in Pendle Hill Pamphlet #51, *Worship*, 1950, republished electronically 2004, pp. 21–22.

^[9] As one story tells it, a Friend approached another after a meeting for worship and said, “Thee preached a pretty sermon today,” to which the other replied, “I know. The devil told me so as soon as I sat down.”

^[10] Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*, (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #305, 1992), p. 3.

^[11] Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Press of FGC, 2002), p. 178.

^[12] Punshon, *Encounter with Silence* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1987, p. 78.

^[13] Sources on individual practices include *Listening Spirituality, vol. 1* by Patricia Loring and John Punshon’s *Encounter with Silence*.

^[14] George Fox, *Epistle 162*, 1658, as quoted by Howard Brinton in Pendle Hill Pamphlet #65, *Reaching Decisions: The Quaker Method* (Wallingford, PA, 1952), p. 12. The complete epistles can be found in *The Works of George Fox*, Vols. VII & VIII (State College, PA: New Foundation Publication, The George Fox Fund, Inc., 1990).

^[15] The principles and procedures that apply to meeting for business apply to committee meetings and any other gatherings of Friends to seek a way forward.

^[16] Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Responsibility in the Meeting for Business*, (Philadelphia: Quaker Press of FGC, 1993).

^[17] Loring, *Spiritual Responsibility in the Meeting for Business*.