

Baltimore Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Revision Committee Proposed Advices, Queries and Voices

Vocal Ministry: Advices

Once meeting begins, take time to enter fully into the spirit of worship. Gently let go of distractions, as you center down and open yourself to the workings of the Spirit. Come to meeting with neither a resolve to speak, nor a determination not to speak, but rather with an attitude of expectant waiting and openness.

If you feel moved to speak, take a moment to test your leading. Is your message from the Spirit, or somewhere else? If it is from God, is it meant only for yourself, or for the entire Meeting? Genuine ministry is often preceded by a physical uneasiness, a "heart pounding weakness", from which our name Quaker is derived. Remember that silence is not just the space between messages, but a deep and living communion with the "Spirit which gives life". Your silent prayer and openness to God are themselves a form of ministry that enriches the Meeting community. Allow adequate time between spoken messages, so that all may listen to God, and truly hear the previous message.

Brevity is an under-appreciated virtue. If you speak, do not feel compelled to explore all the implications of your insight. Rather, leave room for the Spirit to work through the next person, building on your words and possibly extending them in an unexpected direction.

Inevitably, not all vocal ministry will be equally meaningful to all present. Remember that ministry that does not speak to you may nevertheless be valuable to others. If you find yourself struggling with another's words, learn to listen for the Spirit behind the words.

In regard to any impulse to speak a second time during worship, Friends have traditionally counseled restraint. Partly this is a matter of equity (since most present will not speak at all, none should speak more than once), and partly a recognition that to offer genuine vocal ministry is a weighty matter, requiring a degree of spiritual discernment and obedience beyond what most of us can muster twice in a single hour.

Remember that our manner of worship is ultimately a mystery under the direction of the Spirit. Each Meeting for Worship is a spiritual adventure, unique and unpredictable. Let us remember in humility that "the end of words is to bring us to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter." (Isaac Pennington, 1670)

Know that you are a channel for the Light. If you have a deep sense of the urging of the Spirit, consider your obligation to pass the message on.

Vocal Ministry: Queries

How do I discern when to speak and when not to speak?

How do we encourage Friends to allow ample time to absorb the previous message before speaking?

How do I practice listening to the Truth which may be revealed by others?

Vocal Ministry: Voices

The intent of all speaking is to bring into the life, and to walk in, and to possess the same, and to live in and enjoy it, and to feel God's presence.

George Fox, 165

Friends have from the outset taken seriously the New Testament injunction that all believers are priests. That is, they are to be vehicles of communication to each other in a redemptive community in which we have, in fact, abolished the laity and are all ministers. If this is true then no one should come to meeting quite certain that he will not speak. "Let none of us assume that vocal ministry is never to be our part" is what the Advices say. It is our feeling that it is equally unfortunate if someone comes in advance quite certain that he or she will minister. Rather we are meant to come to meeting in openness.

Douglas Steere, Speaking Out of the Silence

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Let your patience be perfect, and all your words seasoned with grace, that they may edify; by which ye may season the earth, your hearts being established in the same, over all the unsavory words and talkers, and live in the truth above them.
George Fox, 1661

I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind, and endeavoured 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 to 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, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offence, 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 a 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 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.

John Woolman, 1741

Since we believe that there is in each person something divine, or what Jefferson called a moral sense, we are naturally called upon to listen to what other persons have to say, to what their hopes and aspirations and concerns are at the deepest level to which we can reach. There are many occasions where such listening is needed, and part of what it means to be a Friend in the world today is to slow down and listen carefully on at least some of those occasions.

Newton Garver, Jesus, Jefferson, and the Tasks of Friends

Some think, through a mistaken judgment, that they must be doing something every meeting, (like the preachers of the letter, who must either be singing, preaching or praying all the time) and by such a conduct they lose their interest and place in the hearts of friends by too long and too frequent appearing in both preaching and prayer: For the avoiding of which, keep close to thy gift, intently waiting to know thy place, both when to speak and when to be silent; and when thou speakest, begin under a sense of divine influence, whether it be in preaching or praying; and without it, do not either preach or pray.

Samuel Bownas, 1750

In Friends' meetings also, from the fact that everyone is free to speak, one hears harmonies and correspondences between very various utterances such as are scarcely to be met elsewhere. It is sometimes as part-singing compared with unison. The free admission of the ministry of women, of course, greatly enriches this harmony. I have often wondered whether some of the motherly counsels I have listened to in our meeting would not reach some hearts that might be closed to the masculine preacher.

Caroline E Stephen, 1890

Never before did there seem so many things to be done, to be said, to be thought; and in every direction I was pushed and pulled, and greeted with noisy acclamations of unspeakable unrest. It seemed necessary for me to listen to some of them, and to answer some of them, but God said, 'Be still, and know that I am God'. Then came the conflict of thoughts for the morrow, and its duties and cares; but God said 'Be still!'. And as I listened, and slowly learned to obey, and shut my ears to every sound, I found, after a while, that when the other voices ceased, or I ceased to hear them, there was a still, small voice in the depths of my being that began to speak with an inexpressible tenderness, power and comfort.

John Edward Southall, c. 1900

The spiritual exercises of the meeting may include spoken words. No one should go to a Friends' meeting with the definite expectation either of speaking or of not speaking. We should be open to dealing appropriately with whatever may be laid upon us by the Spirit of Truth and Life.

Howard H. Brinton, 1942

As the worshiper sits in silence some message may arise out of the depth of the soul that by its nature is intended not simply for the worshiper but for the gathering as a whole. If it is left unexpressed, the worshiper feels burdened with a sense of omission, but if it is faithfully uttered, the worshiper feels a sense of clearness and relief. This peculiar sense of urgency is usually the sign of divine requirement. There is no sure or single test of guidance. As sensitive persons, we learn

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to recognize the call as clearly as we recognize the voice of a friend. We know our friend's voice even though we may be quite unable to describe its quality. A clear conviction that the need of the meeting or of some persons in it or even that our own need requires that words be uttered is often the only assurance when there is doubt. Though a message may seem intellectually fitting it should not be given unless it glows with life.

Howard H. Brinton, 1942

Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one's mind. It's what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind.

Marriane McMullen, 1987

Waiting upon the Holy Spirit in silent expectation and prayer is the basis of our meeting for worship. Vocal ministry should arise out of a sense of being inwardly moved to share a message aloud. Sometimes a message is not ripe yet, or comes clearly but is meant only for the person receiving it, not for the group. Some Friends are led to speak frequently, and others only rarely; yet the timid or brief message of one who seldom speaks may be as moving and helpful as that of a more practiced speaker. The experienced speaker should be watchful not to speak too often or at undue length. No Friend should come to meeting for worship with an intention to speak or not to speak. The most satisfactory vocal ministry arises out of a leading that is felt in the silence so strongly that it cannot be ignored. It should be delivered with as few words as possible, yet as many as necessary. Vocal prayer offered on behalf of the gathered meeting can also bring us into closer harmony with God.

Baltimore Faith & Practice, 1988

Our worship is our gift to God,
Ministry through words is God's gift to us.
As we seek the Presence,
Let us honor these gifts by testing our leadings to speak,
Discerning that they are truly guided by the Holy Spirit
That they are messages for the assembled body
And not ourselves alone,
And by allowing each message to settle
Into the heart of those who need it
By keeping silence between each ministry.
Let us allow ourselves to be gathered
By the power and grace of the light.

Friends General Conference, 1995 Gathering

Offer whatever you have to God, and be prepared to let it go. ... Nowadays if words come to my mind I try to remember to pray, "O Lord, if this is not for this time and place, please take it from me," and very often he does.

Beatrice Saxon Snell "A Joint and Visible Fellowship," 1965

When we gather together in worship let us remember that there is committed to each of us, as disciples of Christ, a share in the priesthood. We should help one another, whether in silence or through spoken prayer or words of ministry. Let none of us assume that vocal ministry is never to be our part....

If the call comes, there should be no quenching of the spirit; the sense of our own unworthiness must not exempt us from this service, nor the fear of being unable to find the right words.

Faithfulness in speaking, even very briefly, may open the way for fuller ministry from others. The tender and humble-minded utterance, given faithfully, can carry its message to the hearts of its hearers.

From Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends
(London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1973), Number 275

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Gradually I realized that the most powerful ministry is a wordless radiation of the Love of God. As I began to experience this secret, undramatic, invisible ministry flowing out from me, I realized that my sometimes dramatic gifts in the ministry had depended all along on the secret, silent ministry of a woman here or a man there who never spoke in meeting. With humility I came to understand how their ministry of being deeply present to God and then radiating the Love of Jesus Christ is the most important ministry of all, for it helps everyone in the meeting to come into a state of living communion and transformation. Words are important of course - they can be a matter of life and death - but they are only words. What really counts is the powerful transformation of human character which can occur in a meeting deeply gathered into the body of Christ.

Bill Taber, 1998

Upon Friends is laid a double responsibility in their communal worship. They are not only hearers and partakers of the Word of Life, but each must be prepared, if the call comes, to share that Word in words to his fellows.

Beatrice Saxon Snell "A Joint and Visible Fellowship," 1965

My piece was pat and all ready to say,
She rose first. I threw my piece away.
My well-turned stuff
Was not so rough
As hers, but easy elegant and smooth.
Beginning middle end
It had and point
And aptly quoted prophet priest and poet.
Hers was uncouth
Wanting in art
Laboured scarce-audible and out of joint.
Three times she lost the thread
And sitting left her message half unsaid.
'Why then did thee throw it
Into the discard?'
Friend, It had head (Like this).
Hers, oh hers had heart.

Robert Hewison, "In the Life," 1965