

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

Meeting for Worship: Advices

The heart of the Religious Society of Friends is the Meeting for Worship. In worship we are called to seek God's will with our entire being: body, mind, and soul.

Worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influences of the Spirit of God. It stands neither in forms nor in the formal disuse of forms. *God is a spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.* (John 4:24, RSV) We treasure silence as a path towards inspiration and guidance that leads to communion with God.

In our Meetings for Worship, we are called to listen with prayerful obedience to God, with a willingness to give as well as to receive. In speech or in silence, each person contributes to the Meeting. Worshipping God together, we can strengthen one another, and our bodies and minds can be refreshed in the life of the Spirit. Our daily lives are linked with the Meeting, the Meeting for Worship with our daily lives. "Let meeting for worship nourish your whole life." (Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 1.02.10)

Give adequate time for study, meditation and prayer, and other ways of preparing for worship. Be mindful that worship is the fusion of individual and collective waiting to experience the love of God. Come regularly to meeting for worship even when you are angry, depressed, tired or spiritually cold. In the silence ask for and accept the prayerful support of others joined with you in worship.

During the Meeting for Worship, Friends may be led by the Spirit to testify, to share an insight, to pray, to praise. When speaking, we should do so clearly and simply, using as many words as necessary and as few as possible. When another speaks, listen with an open spirit, holding the speaker in love. Rest with the message, recognizing that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others.

Meeting for Worship: Queries

In what ways do I prepare my heart and mind to receive the power of God's presence and love?

How does worship deepen my relationship with God? How is this inspiration carried over into my daily life?

Are our meetings for worship held in expectant waiting for Divine guidance?

How do activities of our Meeting find their inspiration in worship? In what ways does worship uphold meeting activities?

Meeting for Worship: Voices

Friends, meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was.

George Fox, 1657

What is the ground and foundation of the gathered meeting? In the last analysis, it is, I am convinced, the Real Presence of God.

Thomas R Kelly, 1940

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, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed....

Robert Barclay, 1678

BYM Proposed Advices, Queries & Voices

Our worship is a deep exercise of our spirits before the Lord, which doth not consist in an exercising the natural part or natural mind, either to hear or speak words, or in praying according to what we, of ourselves, can apprehend or comprehend concerning our needs; but we wait, in silence of the fleshly part, to hear with the new ear what God shall please to speak inwardly in our own hearts, or outwardly through others.

Isaac Penington, 1681

As Catholic worship is centered in the altar and Protestant worship in the sermon, worship for the Society of Friends attempts to realize as its center the divine Presence revealed within. In a Catholic church the altar is placed so as to become the focus of adoration; in a typical Protestant church the pulpit localizes attention; while in a Friends Meeting House there is no visible point of concentration, worship being here directed neither toward the actions nor the words of others, but toward the inward experience of the gathered group.

Howard Brinton, 1952

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 R Kelly, 1938

A Friends' meeting, however silent, is at the very lowest a witness that worship is something other and deeper than words, and that it is to the unseen and eternal things that we desire to give the first place in our lives. And when the meeting, whether silent or not, is awake, and looking upwards, there is much more in it than this. In the united stillness of a truly 'gathered' meeting there is a power known only by experience, and mysterious even when most familiar. There are perhaps few things which more readily flow 'from vessel to vessel' than quietness.

Caroline E Stephen, 1908

Group, like individual worship, is an offering; and let none think that because he comes to meeting dry and empty or in great perplexity or need of help, he has "nothing to offer." He has not only his "outward testimony" to bear, but he has his weakness itself to lay before God in trust and love; and if the meeting is truly "gathered," that offering may bring it to a deeper place than any surface happiness and praise could do.

Beatrice Saxon Snell, 1965

The presence of fellow-worshippers in some gently penetrating manner reveals to the spirit something of the nearness of the Divine Presence. "Where two or three are gathered together in His name" have we not again and again felt that the promise was fulfilled and that the Master Himself was indeed "in the midst of us"? And it is out of the depths of this stillness that there do arise at times spoken words which, springing from the very source of prayer, have something of the power of prayer - something of its quickening and melting and purifying effect. Such words as these have at least as much power as silence to gather into stillness.

Caroline E Stephen, 1908

Our way of worship is not just an historical accident; it is a corollary from our conviction concerning the universal Light of Christ. Believing that in every worshiper, regardless of age, learning, sex, or any other human label, the promptness of God's spirit are at work, Friends meet together in entirely unprogrammed meetings, worship in silent prayer, opening themselves [to the Spirit]. ... In such corporate worship...we are led into a depth of communion with God and with one another that is deeply meaningful and spiritually refreshing.

L. Hugh Doncaster

Yea, though there be not a word spoken, yet is the true spiritual worship performed, and the body of Christ edified; yea, it may, and hath often fallen out among us, that divers meetings have passed without one word; and yet our souls have been greatly edified and refreshed, and our hearts wonderfully overcome with the secret sense of God's power and Spirit, which without words hath been ministered from one vessel to another.

Robert Barclay, 1677

And as many candles lighted, and put in one place, do greatly augment the light and make it more to shine forth; so when many are gathered together into the same life, there is more of the glory of God, and his power appears, to the refreshment of each individual, for that he partakes not only of the light and life raised in himself, but in all the rest.

Robert Barclay, 1678

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On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers, who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and, before the meeting was over a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit down in silence could at least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven.

Caroline Stephen, 1872

Silence is often a stern discipline, a laying bare of the soul before God, a listening to the "reproof of life." But the discipline has to be gone through, the reproof has to be submitted to, before we can find our right place in the temple. Words may help and silence may help, but the one thing needful is that the heart should turn to its Maker as the needle turns to the pole. For this we must be still.

Caroline Stephen, 1908

So near evening I was at [a meeting with Indians], where the pure gospel love was felt, to the tendering some of our hearts. And the interpreters, endeavoring to acquaint the people with what I said, in short sentences, found some difficulty, as none of them were quite perfect in the English and Delaware tongue. So they helped one another and we laboured along, divine love attending. And afterwards feeling my mind covered with the spirit of prayer, I told the interpreters that I found it in my heart to pray to God and believed if I prayed right he would hear me, and expressed my willingness for them to omit interpreting; so our meeting ended with a degree of divine love. And before the people went out I observed Papunechang...spoke to one of the interpreters, and I was afterward told that he said in substance as follows: "I love to feel where words come from."

John Woolman, Journal

I returned to Quaker meeting of my childhood. It was the silence that drew me, that deep, healing silence of the meeting at its best, when the search of each is intensified by the search of all, when the "gentle motions," the "breathings and stirrings" of the Spirit which is within each and beyond all, are expectantly awaited and often experienced.

Elizabeth Gray Vining

The practice of Quaker worship has a strength which goes far beyond the simple act of sitting in an unprogrammed meeting. It defines a community of believers and the way they understand the bond that exists between them. It gives expression to their sense of the indescribable holiness of God. This has probably never been better put than by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians: "*we teach what scripture calls: 'the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard, things beyond the mind of man, all that God has prepared for those that love him.'* These are the very things that God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God."

John Punshon, 1987

Only in its method is the Society of Friends unique. The Quaker meeting for worship and the Quaker meeting for business are unique institutions. It is their purpose to expose the soul to the Light from God so that peace is removed if it ought to be removed, or attained if it can be attained. If the soul becomes sensitive, if its vision is widened and deepened so that new areas of life come within its ken, then a new requirement may be laid upon it and peace removed until that requirement is met. If the soul is able to find in the silence union with the peace of God at the heart of existence, then inward peace is secured and new knowledge and power received. The soul, no longer exhausting its energy in conflict with itself, becomes integrated and unified. Hence arises new power and vision for tasks ahead.

Howard H. Brinton, 1948

There are times of dryness in our individual lives, when meeting may seem difficult or even worthless. At such times one may be tempted not to go to meeting, but it may be better to go, prepared to offer as our contribution to the worship simply a sense of need. In such a meeting one may not at the time realise what one has gained, but one will nevertheless come away helped.

Berks & Oxon QM Ministry & Extension Committee, 1948

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The meeting for worship on a basis of silent waiting in which each member present is open to receive and to express the word which comes to him is a direct consequence of the drive towards perfectionism which insisted on the priesthood of all believers and the absence of a professional clergy. It is a direct consequence also of the experimentalism which denies the efficacy of rites and ceremonies.

Kenneth E. Boulding, 1964

When a local meeting is engaged in building this kind of religious community, the meeting for worship becomes its culminating experience. Here in the corporate silence people who live in the world and face all of its problems gather each week both to work and to let God work. Let there be no mistake about either of these aspects of worship, for both are present.

The meeting for worship when it gathers in the silence is no longer merely a respectable outward association. It is soil that has been ploughed and harrowed and disked by these common experiences. It has been made open for the planting of the seed.

Douglas V. Steere, 1940

The Meeting for Worship is at the very heart of our Quaker faith and the life-blood of the Society. Again and again it has proved to be the right discipline by which the individual may free himself from the usual cares that beset the mind, and allow the light to break in upon his consciousness. Whether it be the first time or the thousandth, it is equally wonderful, equally rewarding and refreshing.

John H. Hobart, 1954

Do you come to meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared? What is the preparation that readies us ... for the life and power of the seed? It is not simply a matter of arriving for meeting on time, though with our hectic lives even that is not always easy. Preparation for worship is a life that integrates prayer, meditation, edifying reading, and deep conversation into the busy routines that most of us pursue. We cannot expect to dive casually out of the heat of the world into the coolness of divine communication for an hour per week. That only brings the heat of the world in and disturbs the waters, leaving no place for peace.

Douglas Gwyn, 1997

If meeting for worship becomes persistently and repeatedly jarring and meaningless, that may be God's challenge to you to rethink your Christianity and come, with his help, to a conclusion as to what you really believe. Feelings always mean something, and by taking counsel with God in prayer we may come to find whether they are the result of spiritual neglect or spiritual growth.

Beatrice Saxon Snell, 1965

Finally, remember that our manner of worship is ultimately a mystery under the direction of the Holy 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