

Spoken Ministry

Meeting for Worship, in the Religious Society of Friends, is held on a basis of silence. This is essentially a silence in which we bring ourselves, those we love, and the world at large into the presence of the Spirit. In this silence we attempt to listen to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, guiding us into the unity which Quakers call a 'gathered meeting' and helping us with present problems and future conduct.

Some Meetings for Worship are completely silent, and these are often blessed occasions of true unity and communion without the need of words. For some very small Meetings, which gather for weeks without any word spoken, the continued silence can be a burden, but in the hour of worship most Meetings will experience spoken ministry from one or more of those present. Usually this will not come early in the hour, because it takes time for the mood of the Meeting to establish itself and for the worshippers to focus their attention:

One of the facets of Quaker worship which may startle a visitor is that spoken ministry may be given by anybody, man or woman, young or old, and may take a number of different forms. This arises from the Quaker experience that the Spirit may call on any of us to offer insights, encouragement or warning to the assembled Friends. We try to remember that every one is given a share of responsibility for the Meeting for Worship, whether that service be in silence or through the spoken word, and we try not to assume that spoken ministry is never to be our part.

This call to minister may come to one who is attending Meeting for the first time, or to a Friend who has come faithfully each week for thirty years without ever having spoken.

What is said in ministry will take various forms, and on some occasions it may be very diverse, dealing with unrelated themes, but possibly drawn together in a satisfying synthesis by a final piece of ministry. Often, however, the second speaker will pick up a theme from the first and develop it, and this process may continue through three or four contributions to give a remarkable coherence to the hour's worship. In a Meeting for Worship which is truly united in an attentive waiting on the Spirit, spoken ministry will seem to flow out of the silence and fall back into it without disturbing the harmony which has been achieved.

However, there are times when this does not happen. The spoken ministry is dull and lifeless or seems like a lecture on politics or ecology. It is well to remember though, when listening to apparently unhelpful ministry, that these words may be an important signpost to somebody else in the room.

When the call to minister appears to come, it should be treated with great caution and seldom be yielded to immediately. If it remains insistent, it is well to ponder whether the message really adds to what has already been said, or whether it is a matter for debate rather than ministry. Challenges are acceptable in Meeting, deliberate provocation is not. The words spoken should be as short and simple as possible, and

they should arise from the need of the moment even if the subject addressed, or the book quoted, has been in the mind for days or weeks. It is important not to follow a previous speaker too quickly or to minister too near the close of the Meeting. Prayer for guidance in these matters is answered.

A word of appreciation for helpful ministry is greatly valued afterwards by those who speak in Meeting, particularly if they have seldom or never ministered before.

Further copies of this leaflet and information about the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) may be obtained from Quaker Home Service, Friends House, Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ.

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