

Guidelines for Vocal Ministry

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of the light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, --not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

Letter from the Meeting of Elders at Balby, 1656

Meeting for Worship is central to our experience as Friends. As our meeting grows in numbers and vibrancy, it is important that we are each aware of the responsibility we bear for the quality and depth of our worship, and specifically for vocal ministry. We are reminded that “it is no light matter to break the living silence. This should be done only with a sense of humility, awe, and reverence.”

The following are offered not as infallible rules, but as suggestions that reflect the cumulative wisdom of our Quaker tradition.

- ❖ Meeting for Worship cannot prosper if it is isolated from the rest of our lives. Friends traditionally have been encouraged to come to worship with “hearts and minds prepared” by a daily discipline of devotional reading, prayer, or meditation.
- ❖ Some Friends may find it helpful to enter directly into Meeting, deferring any social encounters until after worship. Others find it important to interact socially with Friends prior to Meeting. Regardless, all Friends are reminded to be prompt in their attendance at the appointed hour, and to minimize any coming and going after the start of Worship.
- ❖ Meeting for Worship begins when one or two Friends have assembled. As you enter and join in worship, take time to “center down” and enter fully into the spirit of worship. Gently let go of distractions, stilling the mind while opening your heart to the workings of the Spirit.
- ❖ Come to meeting with neither an intention to speak, nor a determination not to speak, but rather with an attitude of openness to the leadings of the Spirit.
- ❖ If you do feel moved to speak, take a moment to test your leading. Traditionally, questions like the following have helped in this process of discernment: Is this message from the Spirit, or somewhere else? If it is from God, is it meant only for me, or for the entire Meeting? Even if meant for the entire Meeting, is now the right time? 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 fully listen, and truly hear the previous message.
- ❖ Vocal ministry “carried on in a spirit of debate, lecturing, or discussion [can be] destructive to the life of the Meeting for Worship. It is rarely helpful to answer or rebut what has been said previously. Friends moved to vigorous support of causes need to find brief and sensitive ways to voice their insights,” including outside of Meeting for Worship (PYM *Faith and Practice*, p. 20)

- ❖ In vocal ministry, brevity is greatly valued. 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.
- ❖ 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).

For further reading, see:

PYM *Faith and Practice* (1997), pp. 17-20.

Thomas Kelly, "The Gathered Meeting".

Howard Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, chapter 5, "Vocal Ministry".

Douglas Steere, *On Speaking Out of the Silence*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 182.

John Punshon, *Encounter with Silence*, pp. 83-91.

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