

The spectrum of diversity in Quakerism and our own unprogrammed meeting

There are three main traditions of Quakerism: evangelical (although there are also different varieties of evangelical friends); conservative, and liberal. There tends to be a literal adherence to the Scriptures and evangelical Quaker churches have ministers and their worship is programmed.

Conservative Quakerism can best be described as retaining a Christ centered unprogrammed tradition. Conservative friends, like liberal friends, do not tend to dwell on doctrine or scripture, as do evangelical friends.

Liberal unprogrammed Quakerism, is modernist in its outlook, and its 3 main ideas are:

1. That experience, not scripture should be primary;
2. That faith should be relevant to the age;
3. That friends needed to be open to new ideas;

Quaker meetings such as ours, do not have paid ministers, our worship is unprogrammed and of course there is the old saying "that we have no laity, because we are all ministers."

“One central area of belief which has received considerable attention over the years is the relationship of Quakerism to Christianity. Whether one interprets the Quaker movement as a strand within Protestantism or as a third force distinct from both Protestantism and Catholicism, the movement, both in its origin and in the various branches which have evolved, is rooted in Christianity. However, from its inception it has offered both a critique of many accepted manifestations of Christianity, and empathy with people of faith beyond the bounds of Christianity.”

“The concern of Friends is not that members affirm a particular verbal formulation of faith, but that it be a living and transforming power within their lives...”

“We encourage one another, in the words of 18th century Quaker John Woolman, "to distinguish the language of the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart." In the course of following their spiritual paths, many friends come to find great depths of meaning in familiar Christian concepts and language, while others do not.”**Faith and Practice, North Pacific Yearly Meeting, 1993, p12**

“We do not, however, consider scriptures, whether Hebrew or Christian or those of other religious faiths, to be the final revelation of God’s nature and will. Rather, we believe in **continuing revelation**. This term emphasizes our ongoing communion with the Living God, our expanding sensitivity in our relationships with one another, and our growing knowledge of the universe.”
(From Session 1, assigned reading “Friends and the Bible”, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice)

We have a wide spectrum of those attending unprogrammed Quaker meetings. A quick survey of those attending present-day unprogrammed Quaker meetings includes nontheists, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist Quakers, and pagans, and more than likely the list is longer.

Definitions:

Christocentric: a Quaker whose inspiration is Christian.

Universalist: the belief that there is a spirit of universal love in every person, and that a compassion-centered life is therefore available to people of all faiths and background.

We are often conscious of trying to find the balance of hearing others with a sense of openness in the diversity of unprogrammed Quaker meetings such as ours. We may use different words depending on our experience and this can often be challenging. This concern is beautifully addressed by John Woolman in this brief story from his journals.

“In 1759, Woolman, much troubled by the wars between the English and the French and the continual threat of wars with the Indians, determined to make a difficult and dangerous trip into Indian country. In his *Journal*, he tells the trials and dangers of his journey of eleven days to Wehaloosing in the north-central part of Pennsylvania, on the eastern branch of the Susquehanna River. There he remained for four days, feeling, as he says, "the current of love run strong." Once he forgot the interpreters who had been translating

his words for his Indian listeners and poured out his heart in prayer. When he had finished, the Indian chief, Papunehang, put his hand on his own breast and said, "**I love to feel where the words come from.**"

<http://strecorsoc.org/jwoolman/title.html>

Can we, in the diversity of our unprogrammed meetings, focus on “where the words come from” when another Friend’s words may be so different than our own?