

Vocal Ministry in the Society of Friends

by Mark Wutka

While Quaker worship is often known for its silence, the purpose of the worship is not to achieve silence. This form of worship is sometimes referred to as “waiting worship” or “expectant waiting”, in order to emphasize that the silence is a result of giving up our own agendas and ideas and waiting to hear the “still, small voice” of the Divine. During worship, we may experience this “still, small voice” in various ways. Sometimes, we may find a particular feeling of peace, or maybe disquiet over something we neglected to do. Sometimes we may have a particular thought or idea come to mind, that is meant for us. There are also times when we are given something to share with the group. We often refer to this as “vocal ministry”.

The Purpose of Vocal Ministry

Although the entirety of the verse does not seem to be quoted frequently in the writings of early Friends, 1 Corinthians 14:26 seems to describe an unprogrammed form and understanding of worship similar to that of Friends:

What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

(NRSV)

The last part of this verse is key for vocal ministry - “Let all things be done for building up.” In the King James Version, all things are done “unto edifying”, and early Friends frequently wrote about various meetings and vocal ministry being edifying. Isaac Pennington wrote “Now, in this edifying, pure edifying, precious edifying; his soul who thus waits, is hereby particularly edified by the Spirit of the Lord at every meeting.” Bridget Story wrote that her husband Christopher's ministry was “not only plain, but powerful and edifying.”

The idea of vocal ministry being edifying to others speaks to one reason why we meet together for worship – that we come together to support one another. We are not a group of individuals who choose to perform their spiritual practices in the same room at some appointed time. We are a spiritual

community that seeks to be in unity with the Spirit, and that even though our understanding of that Spirit, and the language we use to describe it may differ, there is some commonality of experience that we can share, and encourage one another in.

Preparation for Vocal Ministry

In the tradition of unprogrammed ministry practiced by early Friends and continued in modern times by both the unprogrammed FGC meetings, and by the conservative yearly meetings, vocal ministry in meeting for worship is not something that is prepared ahead of time. While the message itself is not prepared, there are various ways in which the messenger, or minister, can be prepared.

Early Friends found that some people felt called to take on ministry as a vocation. In the Friends tradition, this did not mean that someone was a paid pastor who prepared sermons every week, but instead it was someone who not only felt called to speak frequently, but felt called to travel among Friends, or to hold public meetings, or just to be present for worship at meetings that may have few seasoned Friends. In London, a “Second-day Morning Meeting” of ministers would meet to discuss various issues related to their calling. They would arrange to have one or more ministers present at

each first day meeting in London, drawing up a schedule of who would be where for each morning and afternoon meeting for worship.

These early Friends would also speak of the necessity of being prepared for the ministry, in which the experience of the Spirit changed the individual and helped orient their life towards a more spiritual direction. In this case, the Friends weren’t so much preparing themselves, as opening themselves to being prepared by the Spirit.

For modern Friends who carry a concern for ministry, Brian Drayton’s “On Living With a Concern for Gospel Ministry” outlines a number of practices that can help prepare one to be more receptive to the leadings of the Spirit. He suggests that periodic study and reflection can serve to prepare one for giving vocal ministry. He emphasizes that this is not for the purpose of preparing a sermon, but that it seems to prepare the mind for inward discourses. It might be thought of as a way of plowing a field so that it is more receptive to seeds being planted.

Brian Drayton also points out that although some Friends like Rufus Jones were in the habit of jotting down important insights and lines of thought that might eventually make their way into a message,

the presence of these ideas during meeting might make it harder to distinguish whether a particular message is from one's reading, or is a message from the Spirit. It is important to put them aside during worship.

Drayton also emphasizes various forms of listening - inward listening in prayer, listening by the reading of scripture, or in writings from the tradition of Friends. The listening that comes through reading is one in which we may open ourselves to new understandings or insights. I can testify from personal experience that I have had great openings in my spiritual life by reading passages of the bible that I found particularly challenging. Again, this is not done for the purpose of gathering material for a message, but rather for plowing up the ground in which the Spirit might plant seeds.

Not all Friends feel such a calling to this kind of a devotional life. I believe it is still important for all of us to engage in various forms of listening as a preparation for vocal ministry - whether we are the ones giving the message or receiving it.

One particular form of vocal ministry that requires deep listening is one which speaks to the spiritual state of the meeting. Friends with a particular gift for eldering are often sensitive to the spiritual states of others, and of the meeting as a whole, and are sometimes called to speak to a condition. In earlier times, Friends tended to live close together and saw each other frequently as part of their daily lives. This gave them frequent opportunities to know what was going on with individuals in the meeting. With our community being more spread out, it takes more of a conscious effort to see other Friends during the week. Lloyd Lee Wilson, in "Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order", recommends that the members of a meeting look to other members of a meeting for various daily needs. If one Friend does a particular kind of repair work, or craft, or service, consider that Friend first when you need something. While this, when taken to an extreme, might lead to an insular community, it can serve to better connect a meeting community together, and provide a deeper understanding of the spiritual life of the meeting.

Delivering Vocal Ministry

One of the most difficult aspects of vocal ministry is in the discernment of a message. One of the most frequently asked questions among unprogrammed Friends is "How do I know if this is a message from the Spirit?" Unfortunately, while we may wish that there were some secret decoder ring that would

help us decipher authentic messages, we must instead rely on the practice of discernment, both by ourselves and by others.

We may have different experiences of how messages come to us, but one common experience of Friends has been that the Spirit often gives us both positive and negative feedback. Many Friends often feel some unusual prompting or urgency when given a message, as if they will have no peace unless they stand and speak. After speaking, they may feel some sense of peace or completeness. John Woolman described this experience by saying “As I was favored to keep to the root, and endeavor to discharge what I believed was required of me, I found inward peace therein, from time to time, and thankfulness of heart to the Lord, who was graciously pleased to be a guide to me.”

Friends have also felt a strong sense of disquiet, either by not delivering a message they were given, or speaking a message that did not come from the Spirit. Joseph John Dymond tells a fascinating story of his feelings of disquiet and eventual peace after his hesitancy to deliver a message:

So that when one First-day morning, in a pretty large meeting, there was presented vividly to my thoughts a passage of Scripture, with a great pressure on me to rise and repeat it, there came with it a shock of almost overwhelming surprise. I pleaded excuses – my unfitness, my slowness of speech, the offence I should give to some to whom I believed the words would sound like a personal warning. The meeting held long, but at last broke up; and then I came out agitated with grief and remorse. I had refused to render this little service to Him who had died for me! I had been unfaithful, both to Him and to those to whom the message might have been timely!

The secret story of succeeding months can be only briefly told. It was a time at first of lonely sorrow; then of seeking forgiveness; after that of slow growth into a willingness to submit if the call should be repeated. As weeks passed on, this was changed into an earnest desire, an eager prayer, that another opportunity might be given.

There was a long time of waiting in poverty of soul; and when at last another visitation, similar in manner to the first, came to me at a morning meeting, courage and faith again failed, and I kept silence! The interval between the morning and evening meetings was spent in prayer; and when the evening congregation gathered, the Lord helped me to rise and deliver my short message. A subsequent brief address from a minister present confirmed it, and I went home

glad of heart, praising the blessed Master with the words, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me." I had learnt a lesson in those days of hunger and sorrow, never to be forgotten.

By listening for these inner proddings, either of encouragement or correction, we may come to a better understanding of how it feels to be given a message to deliver. For me, there is a feeling of rightness in a message, but it is hard to describe that feeling, and I do not know if others feel the same thing I do. There are many things that come to my mind during meeting, sometimes there are things that I want to say, but they somehow feel more like they are from me than from the Spirit. It feels like there is real life in those messages from the Spirit. At first, I had to have a really strong feeling of that liveness before I would stand and speak, but I have tried to be more sensitive to those differences. There have been some times when I felt that I was not faithful, that I spoke when I shouldn't have. One time during

a worship at the annual session of North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative, I stood to speak and I had an immediate sensation that I should sit back down, but I did not. I felt a wrongness in what I said after I spoke and sat back down. Recently, when worshipping at Chattanooga Friend Meeting, a Friend stood, was silent for a minute or so, and then sat back down. I wished I had done that at NCYM-C. Sometimes, I have something come to me that I'm not sure about. I often try to push it away, and intentionally try not to think about it. Sometimes it comes back and I consider it again. Sometimes when it comes back, it is a little different than before, and may give me a different sense of whether it is from me or from the Spirit. I sometimes find that messages I am supposed to give are particularly pesky and come back up over and over. I have also found at times that when I was hesitant or unsure in discerning a message, someone else stands and gives an almost identical message. I remember one particularly deep meeting at Atlanta Friends Meeting where different messages kept coming to me and over and over someone else would stand and give a similar message. This is usually a good sign of the movement of the Spirit, and when you find people speaking those same things that come to you, it may help you in discerning when you have been given a message, because it is likely that the Spirit was trying to give you that same message.

Many Friends have written about the process of what to do with a message you have been given, because we are sometimes given messages that are only for us, or may be for a particular individual

who we might speak to at a later time, or the message may be for the meeting as a whole. I do not think there are specific rules about this, but rather that we must listen carefully, and rely on our experience of the Spirit to guide us.

If we do have a message that is meant to be spoken aloud to the meeting, there is still a question of when to deliver it, or what exactly is to be said. I have sometimes been given a message in which I felt life, and felt it was to be spoken aloud, and yet it was not the right time to speak it. Then, at some later point, often after someone else has delivered a message, I realize that the time has arrived for me to deliver the message I have been given. Often times it seems like several of us may have pieces of a puzzle and have to put them in the right order.

Friends have had different experiences with when to stand and speak. Some find that they have been given a complete message before they stand. Others may have only a partial idea, or they find that after they stand and speak, they say something different than what they thought they might say. Joseph John Dymond wrote that he initially was given a whole message before he stood, but as he grew in his ministry, he would stand as soon as he felt that he was being given a message, even if he had only a small thought at what it was, and that he found that the message came sentence by sentence as he spoke.

It is important to remember, especially in a large meeting room, that many Friends have hearing difficulties, so it is important to speak slowly, clearly and audibly. Joseph John Dymond writes that “the speaker should address himself to the most distant person in the room, and speak to him in as natural a tone as possible. Raising the voice to a loud pitch at the beginning of a sentence, and dropping it so as to be almost inaudible at the end, is a very common, but a very unwise, and to the listeners very disappointing, practice.”

Some Friends gain a reputation for frequently sharing particularly deep messages, or for speaking to the condition of the meeting. While this can be a blessing to the meeting, it can also make the Friend feel some obligation to speak, and they may be tempted to give less discernment to a possible message, especially if they have found themselves fairly silent in meeting lately. Samuel Bownas also writes

about the temptation to re-deliver a message that one has been given in the past:

for want of keeping humble and inward in spirit with the Lord, they have insensibly gone from

the foundation and spring of living ministry, and depended on memory, former experience, and openings, and not on the inspiration of the Spirit, which is the root of all true ministry, and what proceeds from it is always new and acceptable.

Friends have occasionally likened the ministry that comes from the Spirit to the manna that fed the Israelites in the wilderness. The manna would fall fresh every morning, and could be gathered and eaten, but would spoil if kept overnight. Likewise, messages from the Spirit should fall fresh upon the meeting and not be leftovers from another day.

Receiving Vocal Ministry

Since Meeting for Worship is a communal activity, vocal ministry is also a communal activity. When a Friend rises to deliver a message, the community participates by listening openly for the Spirit speaking through the person. We are all at different places in our spiritual journeys, and are imperfect vessels for conveying messages. By opening ourselves to the message, and casting aside any unkind thoughts we might have about the messenger, we may find ourselves edified at unexpected times. If we feel that holding someone in the Light is helpful for them, perhaps negative thoughts may adversely effect them, or at least not help them.

Not all messages are for all of us, and not everything said in meeting is really a message from the Spirit. While it may be difficult at times, I believe it is still important to remain in that state of open listening, even when it doesn't seem like a message is for us. Perhaps it may trigger some unexpected realization - and it is that unpredictability that requires us to suspend our judgments and prejudices, because we really don't know for sure what's coming.

Some Friends feel a particular calling to hold others in the Light when they rise to speak. Others feel called to hold the entire meeting in the Light for the length of worship (or even outside of worship). These are additional ways in which we nourish vocal ministry, by providing a deep place in which others may settle into expectant waiting and listening.

The community also participates in the discernment related to vocal ministry. Just as the person delivering the message goes through a discernment process in discerning whether a message is from the Spirit, the community can also help provide feedback in this discernment process. It can be helpful to provide feedback to someone who has delivered a message, but that feedback requires some care, especially if it is more negative in nature.

When a message seems to speak to the condition of the meeting, or when it speaks to an individual, it can be helpful for the speaker to know it - to get that acknowledgement that helps build their trust in their own discernment. It is important, too, that we practice discernment with our feedback. Eloquence, cleverness, and intellectual stimulation are valued by many people, but within the context of meeting for worship, I believe we should care more about whether a message answered that of God in us. Did it bring us into a deeper place, or did it give us some awareness of the Spirit speaking in us? Did it feel like the message was also coming from within us?

Negative feedback is necessary, and requires great care. Some people are particularly gifted in helping others see their mistakes in a creative and helpful way, and in knowing the right time and right frequency to do it. It is important that negative feedback is given in love, and received in love.

As with other aspects of ministry, it is the presence of the Spirit in a message that is our concern. Some Modern Friends have some unwritten rules about vocal ministry, such as not speaking twice, or not speaking too often. While there may be some basis for these because of past experience with individuals who consider the meeting to simply be an open forum for expressing their ideas and opinions, it is important that they are not treated as rules. When they become rules, we are essentially giving up our responsibility for discernment. Instead, we may look at these "rules" as additional questions for discernment. If I find myself speaking every week, perhaps I should prayerfully consider whether I am speaking out of some personal desire, or whether I am truly led to speak. Perhaps I may take a little more time when I believe I have been given a message to see if I feel life in the message. As listeners, instead of asking ourselves "didn't that person speak last week?" we might ask "did that message speak to that of God in me?"

Worship is a communal experience, in which we give and receive, no matter what we are doing. Hopefully, those things we give and receive are for the building up of the community.