

Corporate Discernment *Reflections*

Friends General Conference has been profoundly shaped by the corporate discernment of its committees and governing body in recent years. This pamphlet contains several reflections on corporate discernment in FGC's service to Friends.

The FGC Traveling Ministries Program has developed a series of "working papers" to reflect the current understanding of the committee on topics related to its program. The following working paper addresses the role of corporate discernment for Friends led to travel in the ministry.

The Role of Corporate Discernment for Friends Led to Travel in the Ministry

BY BECKEY PHIPPS, TRAVELING MINISTRIES PROGRAM

It has been the practice for a Friend, who believes that she or he has heard a call, to bring the concern before the gathered community of Friends in the monthly meeting, that it may be tested as a true leading of the Spirit. The practice is an expression of our membership one of another, of a mutually accepted obligation, that of the individual Friend to test his or her concern against the counsel of the group and that of the group to seek the guidance of God in exercising judgment. London Yearly Meeting, *Church Government* (1968, rev. 1980), #861 [wording changed to be gender inclusive].

Since 1998 seasoned volunteers for the FGC Traveling Ministries Program have visited several hundred meetings in the United States and Canada. We have enjoyed opportunities to worship with and listen to Friends expressing a broad, and often similar, range of needs, concerns, and spiritual conditions. These include Friends who want to learn or strengthen the role of corporate spiritual discernment in their meetings. It is our experience that there is a particular need among our monthly meetings for corporate discernment by Friends around questions of call to ministry, including the need for on-going nurture and accountability. Sadly, the lack of understanding of the role of corporate discernment for the guidance of the Spirit has resulted in the falling away of some vital forms of Quaker ministry and public witness. Yet, there is also a growing movement to revitalize our discernment practices and bring the Religious Society of Friends back into the life-giving stream of communion with God.

Since its inception, Friends associated with the Traveling Ministries Program have found it helpful to re-examine the witness of generations of Friends called to ministry—and the roles of their monthly meetings in that ministry. We have sought to understand the Truth of their practices and have prayerfully considered which of these traditions still have Power for us today. Here is some of what we have experienced that guides our way.

1. Gifts of the Spirit are gifts to a whole meeting, though they may come to us through individual members. We find the strength to be faithful by growing together in love.

Ideally, our Friends' meetings are worshiping bodies (the *corporeal*, Body of Christ, hence the *corporate*), where members *one of another* accompany each other in journeys of faithfulness. Although our 21st century Western culture emphasizes the free will of self-realized, self-empowered individuals who name their own talents and destinies, this has not been the practice of the Religious Society of Friends. We are urged to be faithful *together*—and not be conformed to the ways of the world. Our gifts originate with the Spirit for the common good, for the building up of the beloved community (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians

12). Through mutuality and caring, through holding one another accountable for faithfully growing into our gifts and following our leadings, Friends **can** live in gospel order—living in right relationship in the peaceable kingdom, or as some have expressed it, the peaceable *kin-dom*.

2. **Discerning leadings and concerns begins with the Seeds planted in individuals, yet those Seeds must be tended by the whole faith community. There are many layers of ongoing discernment involved in faithful ministry.**

The first movement toward ministry is usually felt as an inward, or interior, motion—a leading sensed at the personal level by a Friend. As we grow aware that we may be sensing a leading, the first step is to discern if it is a true leading or merely a good idea. Not all good ideas are leadings of the Spirit. There are many excellent guides available to help us understand the nature of leadings and discernment, such as Patricia Loring’s *Spiritual Discernment: the Context and Goal of Clearness Committees* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 305) and Paul Lacey’s *Leading and Being Led* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet No.264). As the gifts we are endowed with are not for our personal use, they will benefit from being tested within the meeting.

Seasoned and perceptive Friends with gifts in listening and eldership (traditionally known as elders) notice our gifts and name what they see, sometimes with gentle prodding, sometimes with plain-spoken and surprising candor. As we grow to trust these Friends they help us learn to recognize what are our mere wants and desires—based in ordinary self-will—and which are the true leadings of Spirit, originating in God’s loving will for us. As Patricia Loring says,

The experience of being united in Truth produces the expectation that the perceptions of a person truly under divine guidance in a particular situation will be consistent with the perception of others who also are—or have been—attuned to divine guidance. (Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 305, 7)

In the progressive spiritual journey of hearing and responding to God’s call to ministry the discernment of genuine leadings by the individual and the naming of gifts by the meeting community is just a beginning. What usually follows is a formal request to Ministry & Counsel Committee, or its equivalent, for a clearness committee. Friends’ practice of seeking clearness provides the opportunity to worshipfully explore the heart of the matter. Is a Friend being divinely led? How do we know? If so, what are the next steps? These are questions for *both* the individual and the meeting, because a Friend’s leadings serve the meeting directly and/or are an extension of the meeting’s outward witness, and thus deserving of its care.

The FGC Traveling Ministries Program encourages monthly meetings to provide discernment, support, nurture, and accountability for Friends whose leadings involve travel beyond the meeting by naming committees of care for them. The TMP calls such a committee an *anchor committee*—providing a tether to, or grounding in, the monthly meeting. The anchor committee helps to nurture a Friend’s gifts, to wrestle with the challenges of service together, and to lovingly hold that Friend accountable for exercising her/his gifts faithfully. The TMP also asks that a meeting provide a minute of travel for a Friend, which provides evidence that a meeting has corporately discerned and endorsed a Friends’ travel in the ministry and has actively taken that ministry under its care and guidance.

It is important to note here that not all ministries will require a named committee of care, and few require on-going support committees. All gifts of ministry, in whatever form they manifest, are deserving of the notice and care of Friends within the meeting. In general formal counsel with others is most needed when new and differently-oriented leadings arise. It is particularly advisable for the Ministry & Counsel Committee to regularly check in with Friends who are actively engaged in ministry within the meeting or elsewhere, thus providing some active level of care and accountability.

A meeting that values the role of corporate discernment will encourage Friends to disclose and test their leadings with others on a regular basis, whether formally or informally. Sharing our leadings as a matter of practice helps us learn to trust when a

leading is in keeping with building the beloved community, and when it falls short of the mark. As Patricia Loring notes, “The community itself can become the test or touchstone for authenticating leadings” (PHP No. 305, 7).

3. Discerning together our understanding of God’s desire for our meeting grows out of our work with each other in testing individual leadings—and out of God’s love.

As we work together to discern individual leadings and ministries we begin to see how all of these individual gifts and leadings make up the *Whole* of the meeting. Some of the concerns laid on our members are a part of their individual journey within the meeting and we seek ways to support them in that work. Other leadings and concerns, however, may be of a nature that the whole body, the monthly meeting in its corporate role, has been called to come under that weight *as a faith community*. Practicing these layers of individual and corporate discernment helps bring us closer to an understanding of what God is asking of us as members one of another—and as the Religious Society of Friends in our time.

And here is the most excellent key to our discernment: the foundation that God gives for us in this work is *Love* (1 Corinthians 13). This is the Love given to us, and given through us, by God. This, the first motion behind any leading, empowers us to Love each other completely, right where we are—knowing each other in all of our gifts, strengths, and shortcomings. And this illuminating Love reflects back to us who we can become as we grow in faith. It is the Love that roots and grounds us as individuals and as meetings in faith, hope, and compassion. It is the Love that never dies. Yet even if we rightly discern each other’s gifts of the Spirit, and believe we are faithful in using them, and faithful supporting each other, but are *not* rooted and grounded in Love then our labors will ultimately be fruitless, empty actions. So, all of these things we are learning, that we have come to know by experience, must be rooted and grounded in the divine Love of the eternal Christ.

Put plainly, Friends, we need each other on the journey of faithfulness. The discernment of the call to use our gifts in any form of ministry helps make tangible God’s compassionate, loving presence in the world. It is the gracious and complementary work of our meetings, our spiritual communities, to name and discern our gifts, to help us test our leadings, and to help guide us in how to increase our capacity for faithfulness. Our fulfillment as individual Friends, then, begins in community—and bears fruit through the fulfillment of the world.

In 2005, FGC established an Ad Hoc Youth Ministries Discernment Committee to help FGC follow a leading to develop a program to serve Quaker youth. The ad hoc committee organized a special consultation with young adult Friends to learn about their needs and their hopes for Quakerism. It then developed a series of recommendations for FGC’s consideration.

Robin Greenler served as the clerk of that initial ad hoc committee and then became clerk of FGC’s newly established Youth Ministries Committee. The following is her reflection on the process of corporate discernment surrounding the decision to create a new FGC Youth Ministries Program.

Corporate Discernment

BY ROBIN GREENLER, YOUTH MINISTRIES PROGRAM

Ah, there we are, sitting in silence, lifting up a thorny question and suddenly we realize that we all see a common way forward. Corporate discernment? Hardly. Even times when unity in the Spirit may seem so neat, labeling that moment as a result of corporate discernment fails to acknowledge all that is under the tip of that iceberg. In my experience, corporate discernment is an amalgamation of many individual journeys, fusing together into a vision with a common way forward.

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Friends General Conference

In October 2005, the Central Committee of Friends General Conference approved the formation of a new Youth Ministries Committee dedicated to building a truly intergenerational and diverse faith community where the voices of all are heard, where the gifts of each are well used, and where support to really live our faith into action flows freely among Friends of all ages. In the moment FGC approved formation of the youth committee, Central Committee was united in a vision, and clear in the rightness of the path. This was a powerful step in a long process of discernment for the corporate body of FGC. Yet, what happened rested upon many years of individual leadings, witnesses and hard work.

So where did this discernment come from? It came from individuals who felt thwarted in living out the holy power in their lives because of their age. It came from people giddy with appreciation of spiritual power of their peers and from the person grieved at seeing their young adult friends leave Quakerism for more youth-welcoming religious traditions. It came from parents watching their children and children watching their parents and from individuals concerned with the future of the Religious Society of Friends. It came from people hungry for deep communion with those different from them and from those hungry for the authentic word of God wherever it is issued. It came from those angry, grieved, hopeful, excited, serious, joyous, faithful and seeking. This discernment was built upon their work—the vocal ministry, the blogs, the committee work, the examples by being, the traveling ministry, the conversations, the persistent voices speaking over and over until they are finally heard, the organizing of conferences, books, lectures, witnesses, vigils, discussions and the immeasurable faithful worship.

In the end, this discernment was given to the corporate body from God. The movement was not birthed by a few leaders but issued from the lives of many. There were no heroes, only servants. There were no visionaries, only faithfuls. That this discernment was corporate even while resting on much individual revelation was challenging for some. Some of us who had been invested in these leadings for years suddenly saw our concerns fledge. The concerns no longer “belonged” to us, but it is the broader ownership of discerning that gave it stronger wings.

I believe that process done carefully is ultimately more efficient than process done quickly. However, even when discernment is done through the best corporate process, it does not ensure a smooth journey. My experience with the Youth Ministry Committee is that the discernment was corporate and the Central Committee body was clear and united in supporting the mission of the committee. Even in unity, the path of change has not been and will not be smooth. We will still disagree on the journey. We will be challenged at the implications of the work. The goal is not smooth passage, it is only that we may faithfully witness to God’s work as it unfolds. Corporate discernment was one step in that unfolding.

Friends General Conference

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