

A PACKET OF QUOTATIONS FROM A
VARIETY OF QUAKERS ON THE NATURE OF
VOCAL MINISTRY & WORSHIP

Compiled by Marge Abbott for

Multnomah Monthly Meeting virtual conversation
reflecting on vocal ministry

Sunday, July 12, 2020 Noon-1:30

Please feel free to browse this packet and
read the items that speak to you
you are welcome to join the conversation on
July 12 - no registration necessary

The Power of Stillness

**A brief extract by John Edward Southall (1855-1928),
a life-long and strongly convinced Quaker**

This is one way to know God: 'Be still and know that I am God.'
'God is in his Holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.'

A score of years ago a friend placed in my hand a little book which became one of the turning points of my life. It was called "True Peace". It was a medieval message, and it had but one thought, and it was this: that God was waiting in the depths of my being to talk to me if only I would get still enough to hear his voice.

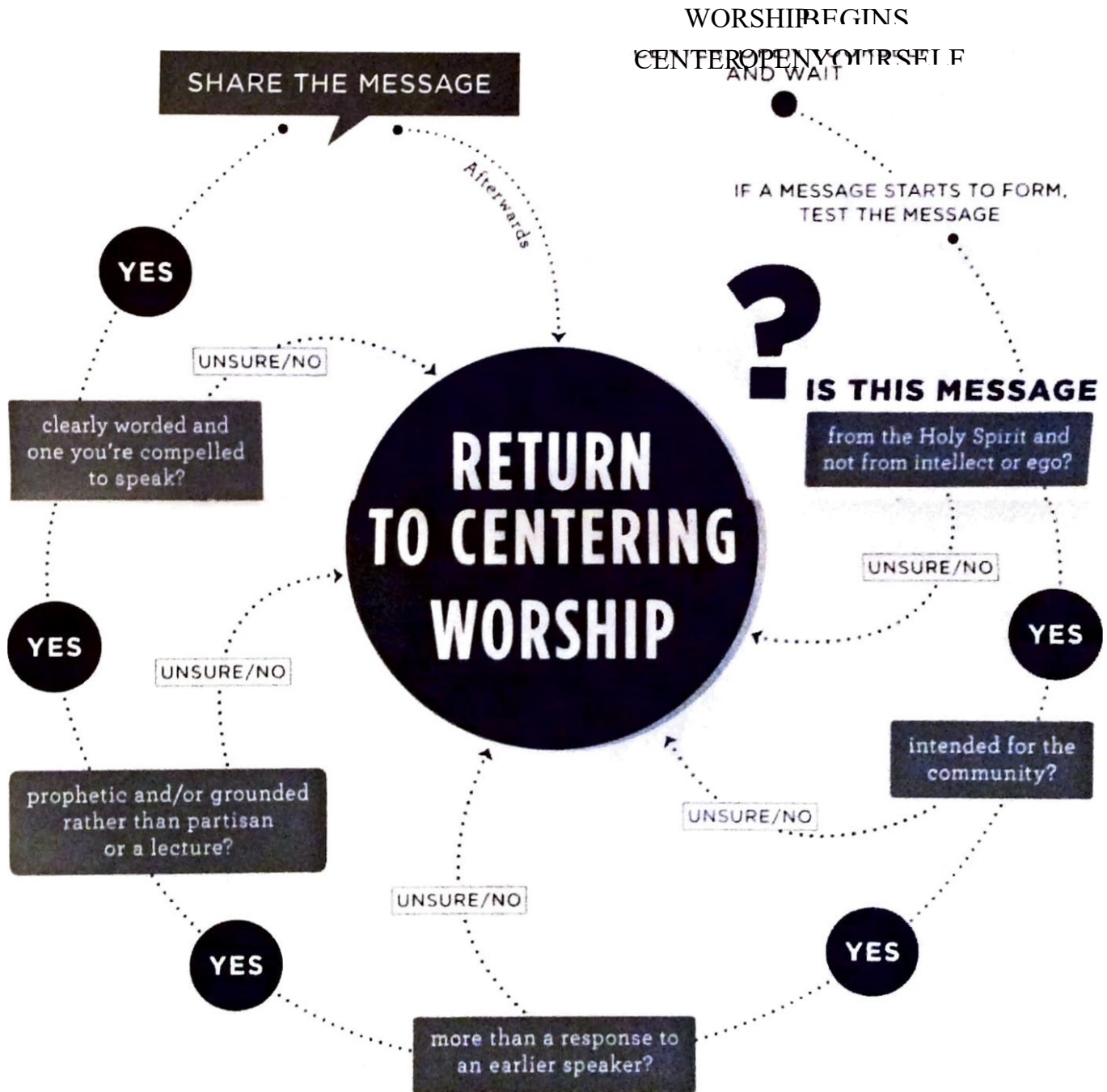
I thought this would be a very easy matter, and so I began to get still. But I had no sooner commenced than a perfect pandemonium of voices reached my ears, a thousand clamoring notes from without and within, until I could hear nothing but their noise and din. Some of them were my own voice, some of them were my own questions, some of them were my prayers. Others were the suggestions of the tempter, and the voices of the world's turmoil. Never before did there seem so many things to be done, to be said, to be thought; and in every direction I was pushed and pulled, and greeted with noisy acclamations of unspeakable unrest. It seemed necessary for me to listen to some of them, but God said, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' Then came the conflict of thoughts for the morrow, and its duties and cares; but God said, 'Be still.' And as I listened, and slowly learned to obey, and shut my ears to every sound, I found, after a while, that when the other voices ceased, or I ceased, or I ceased to hear them, there was a still, small voice in the depths of my being that began to speak with an inexpressible tenderness, power and comfort. As I listened, it became to me the voice of prayer, and the voice of wisdom, and the voice of duty, and I did not need to think so hard, or pray so hard, or trust so hard, but that 'still, small voice' of the Holy Spirit in my heart was God's prayer in my secret soul, was God's answer to all my questions, was God's life and strength for soul and body, and became the substance of all knowledge, and all prayer, and all blessing; for it was the living God himself as my life and my all.

This is our spirit's deepest need. It is thus that we learn to know God; it is thus that we receive spiritual refreshment and nutriment. It is thus that our heart is nourished and fed; it is thus that we receive the living Bread; it is thus that our very bodies are healed, and our spirit drinks in the life of our risen Lord, and we go forth to life's conflicts and duties like the flower that has drunk in, through the shades of night, the cool and crystal drops of dew. But, as the dew never falls on a stormy night, so the dews of his grace never come to the restless soul.

We cannot go through life strong and fresh on constant express trains; but we must have quiet hours, secret places of the Most High, times of waiting upon the Lord when we renew our strength, and learn to mount up on wings as eagles, and then come back to run and not be weary, and to walk and not faint.

ARE YOU CALLED TO SHARE A MESSAGE DURING WORSHIP?

These are guidelines to assist you. As always, the movement of the Spirit is the ultimate authority.



ON VOCAL MINISTRY:

Nurturing the Community through Listening and Faithfulness

Barry Crossno and J. Brent Bill

Pendle Hill Pamphlet #460 (excerpts)

WHEN TO SPEAK DURING MEETING FOR WORSHIP?

Worship Begins: Center, Open Yourself, and Wait

[The authors then offer a series of queries to ask when a potential message arises within and offer more reflections with each query—I've just included the queries here until the one on prophetic speech]

Is This Message from the Holy Spirit and Not from intellect or ego?

Is This Message Intended for the Community?

Is this Message More than a Response to an Earlier Speaker?

Is This Message Clearly Worded and One You're Compelled to Speak?

Is This Message Prophetic and Grounded versus Partisan or a Lecture? Many of us have experienced vocal 'sharing' that didn't rise to the level of ministry. We've heard things that felt like announcements, lectures, history lessons, or partisan political speeches that did not have the power of prophecy. There are times and places for such things—just not during meeting for worship.

That's why another test is to ask "if I speak what's currently on my heart, would someone mistake it for a personal announcement, a lecture of a partisan political statement?" if the answer to this question is "maybe" continue to deepen and test the message. If it feels like an announcement, save it for announcements after worship has ended. If it might be a lecture or a lesson, consider offering a class on it some Sunday after worship. If it feels politically partisan, ask during announcements or fellowship if others would like to join in a discussion and discernment time around the topic. . . .

Discernment on Prophetic Speech versus Partisan Political Speech

To say that politics does not have a place related to vocal ministry precludes the movement of the Spirit. It also denies the reality that prophecy and politics are often interwoven. Jesus was crucified because of this truth and George Fox, with many Friends past and present, was jailed for it. After all, one of the hallmarks of being a Friend is attempting to live a life of integrity—to have our personal beliefs and experiences harmonize with our actions and way of being in the world.

Yet, it does seem that partisan political messages delivered during vocal ministry fall short of feeling divinely led for many listeners. That's why some Friends are clear that politics has no place in a message given during worship. Conversely, other Friends are equally clear that harmonizing our testimonies with our actions in the world sometimes prompts Spirit to have us stand and advocate for certain political or economic principles or policies. Given this conundrum we must discern the difference between vocal ministry that is prophetic, perhaps on a topic that a topic some would see as political, and speech during worship that is simply politically partisan. . . . With that said, there are principles that can guide us as we endeavor to provide true vocal ministry.

One is to consider the difference between prophetic ministry, with the political implications of that message to be explored personally and corporately outside of worship, versus what is straightforward political advocacy or partisanship being delivered to a room of people who may or may not already agree with the position. The first is a message from Spirit in service to a room of people who have gathered to know that which is larger than themselves. The second is sharing personal thoughts in a way that leaves some in the room feeling that they are a captive audience for someone's political beliefs. . . . If it felt like [a political announcement or advocacy] what are a few things that made it feel that way? We suggest that they include:

- urging political action without urging dialogue
- naming political parties or individual politicians
- assuming everyone has the same opinion on this issue
- naming systems of oppression or operations that probably need to be unpacked

. . . Vocal ministry needs to be free of partisan speech that lacks prophetic grounding, that divides ideologically instead of calling us to examine our souls and actions in this world. It is as much about how we speak prophetically as what we speak. We can

draw attention to systemic inequity through prophetic ministry and leave how we solve the problem to education, dialogue, and sharing outside of worship where a mutual understanding can be constructed. . . . True ministry, as the old saying goes, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. But it does not afflict the comfortable for affliction's sake. It does so to draw us closer to the breaking heart of God and to the creation and re-creation of the beloved community in God's name.

That's why we propose that the most powerful vocal ministry will generally reference principles rather than particular public figures; will include personal life experience, will illustrate the universality of the issue; will invite prayer, contemplation, dialogue, and possible unified action rather than presupposing unity; and will call the gathered community to working with Divine assistance to bring about a better world. . . . To be ministry, a message must be one that—even if hard—rings with truth and whose words can be opened to and not shut out. . . . the real test of whether something is vocal ministry is whether you feel compelled by the Spirit to speak. Faithfulness to Christ, our Inward Teacher, to the Divine, to the Light is always the final arbiter when it comes to vocal ministry.

Difficult Speech During Meeting for Worship

A dilemma facing many meetings—and in particular members of Ministry and Counsel committees—is what to do when someone, often from sincere motives, offers words that do not rise to the level of ministry. Or, worse, says something racist, homophobic, factually wrong, or potentially injurious to another member of the worshiping body. . . . Ignoring such speech leaves the impression that the majority sees nothing wrong with what was said. This wounds individuals and can fracture a meeting. Further, by ignoring what was spoken we ignore the testimony of equality to which God has called us to bear witness.

So what are we to do?

Earlier [in this pamphlet] we said to resist the urge to give a rebuttal. With that said, some words and ideas are so harmful when uttered that it's necessary to pray as to whether you are called to 'reset' the room by calling Friends back to shared principles. [Here they note Ministry and Counsel have special responsibility to act].

If you discern that you are called to reset the room, you should be faithful in doing whatever you are called to do. We believe, however, that your actions should be guided by love and

care for every person in the room—those who are possibly aggrieved and the speaker—without excusing the actions of the speaker. . . .

If something was said that seems an error of ignorance or stems from the absence of awareness, then any response in worship must be carefully measured. Or you might wait to say something during announcements. As a member of Ministry and Counsel you are not seeking to shame anyone. Simultaneously, you must assure the gathered body, including those who have been hurt, that you noticed what happened, it wasn't in good order, it does not reflect the values of the meeting, and that such speech and the ideas underneath it will be addressed.

We believe the situation must be addressed in some fashion before the meeting breaks and Friends leave the room. . . .

It could be that what was spoken into the room feels so damaging it must be addressed immediately, directly and forcefully. You may have a speaker who is speaking at length with intention to harm or with disregard for the feelings of others.

In such a case, you may feel called to stand in silent elderring until they cease speaking and sit down.

This is a more forceful option. Be aware that such an action can feel shaming to the speaker. However, it may be a Spirit-led option in the case of someone speaking in a harmful fashion. In that case, the welfare of the body as a whole is primary. [They then suggest 2 members of Ministry and Counsel meet with the speaker after worship in private and also announce that members of that committee are available to meet with anyone who feels harmed or wonders what happened]

Doing this well is a process that some have described as "calling people in" rather than "calling people out." Calling people in requires your starting intention to be a deepening of the relationship of this person with the community. Calling someone in names the end goal as a deepening of relationship.

What do we do if someone says something that is simply factually wrong during vocal ministry? That depends on the level of the error and whether time is of the essence. You need to be clear that there is something at stake to make such a correction in public. If the factual error could lead the meeting into making poor decisions, then you may feel called to correct the error during announcements. Don't make a habit of this. . . .

Thoughts on Speaking in Meeting

from *Quaker Quotations on Faith & Practice*, Leonard S. Kenworthy, 1989

1. Speaking in Meeting

The most satisfactory ministry in the Quaker meeting of today arises out of a flash of insight, felt in the silence and delivered with brevity and a deep sense of concern. [Howard H. Brinton in *Prophetic Ministry*].

When one rises to speak in such a (gathered) meeting, one has a sense of *being used*, of being played upon, of being spoken through. Thomas R. Kelly in *A Testament of Devotion*.

Brevity, earnestness, sincerity, and frequently a lack of polish - characterize the best Quaker speaking. [Thomas R. Kelly in *The Gathered Meeting*].

If there is One who gathers the meeting inwardly and who is communicating and drawing at our lives unceasingly, and if vocal ministry in such a meeting is focused and irradiated from below the surface mind, it should not surprise us if several persons were at the same time moved to minister on roughly the same theme. [Douglas V. Steere in *Speaking Out of the Silence*].

Ministry from the diffident and shy who seldom speak is often most helpful to the meeting, and the very simple prayer or message may be of great value when it has the authentic ring of deep personal experience. Vocal ministry should not be lightly undertaken. It is not the utterance of careless surface thoughts that flit through the mind, not even the sharing of merely intellectual level of riches won from reading and reflection; it is the offering of experience won in thought and in life which through prayer and obedience has led to a deeper vision of God and his ways of dealing with men. [London Yearly Meeting's *Church Government*.]

2. Vocal Prayer

The highest vocal exercise in a Meeting for Worship is spoken prayer. [Howard H. Brinton].

Vocal prayer, poured from an humble heart, frequently shifts a meeting from a heady level of discussion to the deeps of worship. [Thomas R. Kelly in *The Gathered Meeting*].

Underlying and undergirding the unprogrammed worship of Friends is prayer; the prayerful corporate waiting which takes place in any meeting when it has centered down. As we go deeper and deeper, prayer is our task as individuals and as a group Another form which prayer may take ... is vocal prayer in meeting. As those present are stirred and uplifted as a result of the silence or the ministry which comes from it, vocal prayer may provide a focusing point which witnesses to the spirit at work in the meeting. At other times a prayer may instill life into a silence which has previously appeared dead, or bring unity to a meeting whose ministry has seemed scattered and discordant, or gather up and bring into focus a number of fragmentary messages. [Helen G. Hole in *Prayer: The Cornerstone*].

Even though the words of vocal prayer may sometimes barely be audible, the whole meeting may enter into its spirit, simply and humbly, in thanksgiving, adoration, intercession, petition, or dedication. [London Yearly Meeting (1959)].

Messages Which Disturb Us

The attender at a Friends Meeting must accustom himself to hearing much that he feels is unprofitable, at least to himself. His forbearance in respect to speakers who are struggling, perhaps blindly, toward the Light and missing the way, is in itself a valuable exercise. [Howard H. Brinton].

When we are inclined to "pass judgment on the ministry," or feel out of unity with what is said, let us ask ourselves whether the reason may not be that we are listening to a truth to which our own psychological make-up has made us blind and which therefore has a special value for us. [W. Russell Brain].

A Friends Meeting for worship finds no room for debate or for answering (still less for contradicting) one another; if this is desirable, it will be left for another occasion. And if anything should seem to be spoken amiss, the spiritually-minded worshipper will have the wit to get at the heart of the message, overlooking crudity and lack of skill in its presentation, and so far from giving way to irritation at what seems unprofitable, he will be deeply concerned for his own share in creating the right spiritual atmosphere in which the harm will fade and the good grow. [A Neave Brayshaw].

Occasionally a message will come like a bolt of lightning out of the blue. It may be delivered in a burst of anger or with a deep sense of frustration. Worshippers should try to think of such a message as a cry for help, a plea for a lifeline. Someone should feel moved to offer a prayer for Divine Guidance or to utter words of compassion, understanding, or helpful advice. Moreover, one or two Friends should also feel called upon to sit down quietly after Meeting with such a disturbed person and counsel with him or her. [Leonard S. Kenworthy in *Quakerism: A Study Guide to the Religious Society of Friends*]

FROM NORTH PACIFIC YEARLY MEETING FAITH AND PRACTICE, 2018

Now, Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal Light search you, and try you, for the good of your souls. For this will deal plainly with you. It will rip you up, and lay you open, and make all manifest which lodges within you: the secret subtlety of the enemy of our souls, this eternal searcher and trier will make manifest. Therefore, all to this come, and by this be searched and judged, and led and guided. *Margaret Fell, 1656.*

The Religious Society of Friends . . . is about nothing if it's not about transformation. Helping each other open to the Living Christ among us, allowing ourselves to be searched by the Light at work within us, humbling ourselves to be taught by the Inward Teacher, trusting that surrendering to the Refiner's Fire, we can be given new hearts. And it is and always has been through these new hearts that we are made channels for the Motion of Universal Love. *Noah Baker Merrill, 2012.*

Clearly, vocal ministry that we might dismiss as "popcorn" might actually be lifesaving to someone else—even if we never know about it. Thus, we are challenged by our faith to grant respect to ideas that we are tempted to label as meaningless or negative. Different individuals connect very differently with all that is holy. It may be through song, through awareness of the Earth's majesty, through the sharp taste of injustice, or through unexpected moments of compassion. Our Quaker practice of listening requires us to go deeper and learn how we might engage with the Life that dwells in places we would avoid. *Margery Post Abbott, 2014.*

Assembled by Marge Abbott

VOCAL MINISTRY

Quotations from *Britain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice*

Springing From the Reality of Experience

“All true ministry springs from the reality of experience, and uses our gifts of heart and mind in its expression. But ministry is not the place for intellectual exercise. It comes through us, not from us. Although we interpret the Spirit it is that Spirit which will lead us to minister. The Spirit will decide which experiences are relevant and which will speak to the condition of the Meeting. If you have to decide whether it is right to speak, consider that it isn't. If your words are important the meeting will find them anyway.”

Exploring the fundamental Elements of Quakerism, 1986.

“Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one's mind. It's what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind.”

Marianne McMullen, 1987

Responding to the Inner Promptings

“For some weeks before this particular Sunday I had been puzzling over and questioning in my mind various problems connected to my work. It was one of those episodes of spiritual upheaval which most of us go through from time to time when we seem to question our normal certainties, poke around the foundations of our normal life and discover to our alarm that some of them are very shaky. I had been in this highly charged state for several weeks.

“On this Sunday morning though, I went quietly to meeting with my family, my recent preoccupations submerged by the business of getting us all dressed and breakfasted and to the meeting house on time. But as the minutes ticked by and I sat in the healing peace, I began to be aware that something inside me was formulating a question which urgently needed to be asked. I say ‘something in inside me’ because it seemed at the same time to be both me and not me. I discovered to my horror that this something was urging me to get up and ask my question. My heart was pounding uncomfortably and I began to shiver (I don't know if this was obvious to those around me; I was certainly aware of this shivering but shyness prevents one from asking afterwards whether these physical symptoms are visible to others). To start with I resisted this prompting. I looked around the room and noticed several Friends before whom I was reluctant to make a fool of myself. I could not get up and speak in front of them. I would rather die first. The shaking and pounding diminished a little as I decided this. But not for long. Soon it started up again, insistent and not to be denied. This time I told myself ‘I'll count to twenty and then if no one else has spoken I shall have to.’ Again, a slight abatement of the symptoms. But to no avail. I counted

twenty and then fifty and still no one spoke. Now I sat conscious only of this overpowering force which was pushing me to my feet until finally I had to give in to it.

“Afterwards I found it difficult to believe I had spoken. It was all over so quickly. Had I really stood up in front of all these people and testified/ Well, hardly testified, but yes, I had been driven by some inner prompting which, for want of a more precise word, one might well call spirit; and yes, I had quaked, most fearfully, with something which was more than just the fear of making a fool of myself before family and friends.”

Elisabeth Salisbury, 1968

Different Types of Ministry

“To some are granted deeper spiritual discoveries and revelations than to others, but to all, waiting in expectancy, at moments and in some measure is given a sense of the living touch of God. At such moments there may come the kindling of mind and heart which impels obedience to speak under the immediate promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is the ministry of inspiration, the prophetic ministry in the true sense, when the spoken word pierces to the heart of our relationship with God, unveils the living presence of Christ in the midst of the worshipping group and in its separate members, opens to our sight the way we must tread if we would realize that Spirit in and through our daily activities and find the creative response to the challenges of our time. In ministry of this character and depth something is given in the utterance which is beyond the intellectual and emotional capacity of the human being speaking, but which uses and enhances and transcends the natural gifts, the acquired knowledge, the hard and honest thoughts or the reaches of the speaker’s imagination.

“There is also the ministry of teaching which combines ‘the potency of prayer and thought’. It recalls the meeting to the discoveries of truth, the perception of the acts of God in the lives of individuals. It includes the effort to understand and to interpret the central fact of Jesus Christ and his place in history, and the searchings and findings of men and women down the ages and in our own day as they have sought to relate new discoveries and insights to their understanding of eternal truth.

Britain Yearly Meeting, 1967, 1994

When to stop?

“I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind, and endeavoured to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the true Shepherd. And one day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up, and said some words in a meeting, but not keeping close to the divine opening, I said more than was required of me and being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks, without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could take satisfaction in nothing. I remembered God and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity on me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offense, and my mind became calm and quiet, being truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. And after this, feeling the spring of divine love opened, and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting in which I found peace. This I believe was about six weeks from the first time, and as I was thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock.”

John Woolman, 1741

Not Answering Others

“In my young tempestuous days I heard many things in Friends’ meeting that I disliked and some that seemed to me quite false, and I felt the need to answer them. I was taught, and I believe correctly, that to insist on answering there and then would be to destroy the meeting; and that we all sit under the baptizing power of the spirit of Truth, which is its own witness. We sit in silence so as not to trip over words; and we trust the good in each other which is from God, so that we may be kept from the evil.”

J. Ormerod Greenwood, 1980

The Intent of All Speaking

“The intent of all speaking is to bring into the life, and to walk in, and to possess the same, and to live in and enjoy it, and to feel God’s presence.”

George Fox, 1657

Quaker Meeting for Worship

Guidance Prepared by Minneapolis Friends Meeting

Minneapolis Friends Meeting has no pastor or program. We meet together in quiet worship to experience God directly. The silence is both an expression of our faith and a way of helping us to come into the presence of God. Scripture says, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) We believe that in the silence we can experience God. This silent communion is the heart of our time together.

Preparation

Meeting begins when the first person enters quietly, sits down and turns his or her mind toward God. When you're settled comfortably, start to "center" yourself. Try to tune out the sounds of the world around you and the lively thoughts in your mind, in order to feel the presence of God within. This is not so much a matter of being *silent*, as of being *still*.

Soon you might feel a sense of "gatheredness," an awareness that you're in the midst of a prayerful community. Friends have always believed that the key to worship is quiet listening and waiting. We try to still the voices of our own minds and thoughts and listen instead to what God is saying, remembering that many messages don't come to us in words. Remember that the deepest meetings might be mostly or entirely silent.

Don't worry about distracting thoughts. Try, if only for an instant, to be quiet in body, mind and spirit. This stillness might clear the way for a sense of God's presence. If you feel unfocused, take strength from those around you. Let their quiet reverence help you to feel calm and focused. Remember that we can draw each other closer to God.

Spoken Ministry

In unprogrammed Quaker worship, we seek to put aside the thoughts and cares of everyday life and listen instead for what God might be saying to us, both individually and as a group. Sometimes we might be led to share our thoughts aloud; at other times, God's word is for us alone. We must pay attention to the difference. Friends' worship is not an encounter group, a discussion or an exchange of pleasant thoughts.

The spoken ministry that arises out of the silence can come from anyone in the worshipping group. No one can tell in advance whether he or she will be moved to speak, but all should be open to the possibility.

If a person feels the urge to speak, then a process of discernment or "testing" is necessary. The traditional advice is to resist speaking as strongly as one can, and to speak only if remaining silent would be disobedient to God's call. Is God really asking me to speak aloud the words that have formed in my mind? Do these words arise from this meeting for worship as a spiritual insight, or are they instead a personal concern that should be shared in another way? Should these words be "seasoned" within me for a time, to be shared later when they've had a chance to blossom more fully? In the old days, this testing process was called the "exercise" of the meeting.

If you're uncertain whether to speak, consider the following:

Wait for a time in silence to see how the insight changes. Some Friends wait through several meetings for worship before sharing their leading.

Ask whether the insight will serve the whole meeting or is meant for you alone.

Vocal ministry should be motivated by your own religious experience, rather than by a desire to respond to someone else's message.

Be certain that your ministry is spiritual and intended for worship. Personal or social concerns can be shared in other ways.

If, after waiting, you do feel called to minister aloud, remember these guidelines:

Please stand if you're able and speak in a clear voice that will carry to the person sitting farthest away from you across the room.

Speak briefly and only once. A few heartfelt words are better than a long explanation.

Never speak immediately after someone else. Friends need a chance to absorb the previous message. You might be surprised to find that your message changes during this waiting period – what you share eventually might be quite different from what you had intended at first. You might also find that your need to speak fades away entirely.

Those who don't participate in vocal ministry serve the meeting through silent prayer and attentive listening. If your reason rejects the words of someone's message, let your heart find the spirit behind the words. Keep in mind that the message might speak deeply to someone else in the group even though it doesn't speak directly to you.

Seeking Balance in Worship

Meeting for worship, therefore, has two parts: the silent worship and the spoken ministry. We listen closely to God by seeking to be still in worship and by turning over in our minds the ministry that is given aloud. It's not always easy to maintain harmony and balance between the silence and the spoken ministry, but it's important to be always mindful of the responsibility.

October 31, 2011

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 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 Penington 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 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 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 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 has 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 that 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 affect 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 that 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



Through the Flaming Sword

Exploring Quaker Spirituality, Faith & Practice

<http://throughtheflamingsword.wordpress.com/2013/11/08/what-is-the-religious-society-of-friends-for-part-iii/>

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[Through the Flaming Sword](#)

What is the Religious Society of Friends for? Part III

November 8, 2013

Author: **Steven Davison**

Taking people to G*d—the role of vocal ministry

In theory, we only speak in meeting for worship when prompted to by the Holy Spirit. In practice, I think that most of us most of the time are not so sure what—or who—prompts us to speak, and would hesitate to claim we speak for God, even though that’s exactly what our forebears thought for centuries. Yet we each have certain signs, certain criteria that the experience of prompting must meet before we rise. We take speaking in meeting very seriously.

And yet, if you’re like me, you have the sense some of the time (maybe a lot of the time) that Friends place their bar a little too low, that “vocal ministry” has devolved into “speaking in meeting”, that the Spirit-led prophetic Word need only be “heartfelt” and “uplifting”.

But who’s to say? While I completely trust my general sense that much of our vocal ministry is superficial and not likely to pull the meeting into the depths of divine communion, I agree that we must beware judging any specific message or messenger. How many times have I sighed inwardly at some message, only to find out later how deeply it has affected someone else.

Thus, I war with my judgmental self while I wish our vocal ministry was more nurturing and I constantly seek ways to deepen it, in myself and in the meetings I attend, without offending my fellow worshippers or quenching the spirit that might be working within them.

All this inner foment we experience over vocal ministry is one of the reasons why many Friends and attenders are so nervous about speaking that they just don’t speak; they quench their own spirit. And any “program” that would seek to lift up the quality of vocal ministry runs the risk of making this all-important service even more intimidating.

Nevertheless, for many reasons, paying better attention to vocal ministry, as individuals, as committees with oversight for ministry, and as meetings, could not be more important. For the purpose of vocal ministry is to bring people to G*d, to reveal the Light within them and to help kindle the kingdom in our midst. In addition to this essential role, vocal ministry serves G*d and the meeting in several other ways, as well.

Take outreach and the growth of the meeting. Meetings need to do three things to hold onto the people who come to meeting to check us out: a friendly community, a ready ministry for children and young families, and a certain depth to meeting for worship, some sense that the Spirit really is at work here. This latter depends on the quality of the silence, which in turns depends on that critical mass of Friends who know how to find their own center and help the meeting find its center. And it depends on the quality of the vocal ministry. Superficial, conversational vocal ministry not only fails to bring people to G*d, but gives the wrong impression about what the meeting for worship is for.

Or take the place of ministry generally in the life of the members and of the meeting. Vocal ministry is the training ground for ministry of all kinds: for individuals, it's how we learn to recognize the true promptings of the Holy Spirit and gain the courage to faithfully answer it; for the meeting, it's how we learn to take responsibility for nurturing, recognizing, and supporting our members' ministry, and how we gain the courage to take responsibility for our worship—being willing to engage with our members to deepen their ministry and being willing to protect the worship from disorderly messages and messengers.

Or—back to my theme of the gathered meeting—vocal ministry is a key element in bringing the gathered body into the Presence at the center of our worship and fellowship. When each message calls us deeper toward that center within us and amongst us, oh how sweet is the water from that well! When messages pull us outward, into the thinking mind, or toward the surface with some personal story, some media content, or some worldly event . . .

And then there's the *call* to vocal ministry, what Friends used to call “gospel ministry”. In the elder days, when meetings recorded ministers and took active responsibility for vocal ministry, Friends assumed that one could be *called* to the vocal ministry, that God could tap you on the shoulder for more or less regular service. We rarely think of it this way anymore. I think we should.

Many meetings (most meetings?) do have Friends who speak quite regularly. My meeting does. I am one. We each have our style. We each have a reservoir of personal experience that informs and colors our ministry. Some of us have found that there are themes to our ministry. We each have a calling. Don't we?

Often our members do not recognize this pattern as a calling and neither do our meetings. We do not take responsibility for such callings, for the consequences of a Friend feeling led to speak fairly often. This inattention causes no trouble most of the time; we simply trust each other and most of the time, this works out fine. And there's something to be said for, “first, do no harm”.

Unless, of course, one of your regular speakers does cause trouble. Then the committee with oversight of worship and ministry needs to act to protect the worship. This eldership role is fraught with difficulties nowadays, and that will have to be a subject for another post.

I am more focused here on those of us who feel a calling and are struggling to be faithful. In my own case, for instance, I feel called to a vocal ministry of teaching (among a handful of other areas in meeting life for which I carry a concern). I often take an opportunity, often suggested by some earlier vocal ministry, to expose the meeting to some aspect of Quaker history, faith, or practice—to do some religious education.

For one thing, it's just about the only way to reach most of the meeting with the elements of our tradition that the meeting needs to know in order to function effectively and to carry the tradition forward. My meeting does have a pretty robust adult RE program, but it ranges widely across many topics and only occasionally focuses on Quaker essentials.

But doing this sometimes feels like I am lowering my own bar a little. I constantly question myself: am I really led—again—to do this? Usually the answer is yes. But it makes me nervous.

I would love to have some oversight, a backup, a corporate haven to which I can return to test my discernment and my usefulness. Am I bringing people closer to G*d with my vocal ministry? That's the question—and the role of vocal ministry.

[November 8, 2013 at 1:55 pm](#)

I'm on an edge of a disagreement here because the issue is subtle. We need to be careful about derailing the worship by speaking 'in our own will;' but it really isn't 'our will' that's the trouble.

We need to keep in touch with the Presence, but keeping in that Presence doesn't require endless silence or necessarily eschewing "the thinking mind, or... some personal story, some media content, or some worldly event." I'm guessing that we can bring all sorts of mental content into the Presence of God — and the crucial issue is whether we can remain in that Presence when we do so. If our unconscious belief/feeling is that the worldly matter is more important, somehow 'real' on its own, independently of God's power and purposes, then such matters automatically divert us.

It may be — although it is certainly both a difficult thing to practice and a scary practice to recruit people for — that we need a form of worship more akin to 'worship sharing.' That is, that the presumption when we begin [whatever we call this] should be that people will speak — but that participants will discipline themselves towards remaining grounded in the Presence, towards not being carried away by conversational habits.

I suspect that people are intended to practice the exchange of religious insights as an essential spiritual nutrient (and should critically examine, and creatively expand on them as well) but that it's devilishly difficult to do so in the right spirit.

Possibly we should look at this in a similar way to what's recommended in some common meditation instructions: ~Thoughts will come up; indeed, it wouldn't be desirable to eliminate them even if we could. But rather than letting them have their way with us, we should notice that we've drifted & return to the object of meditation.