

Silent Worship and Quaker Values

By **Marsha D. Holliday**, Friends General Conference, 2000.

If you have never before attended an unprogrammed Friends (Quaker) meeting for worship, your first meeting may surprise you.

While all Quakers meet in worship to hear more clearly God's "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12), Friends in the unprogrammed Quaker tradition base our worship entirely on expectant waiting. We take the Psalmist's advice literally: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). We meet in plain, unadorned rooms because we have found that, in such places, we are less distracted from hearing that still small voice. There are no pulpits in our meeting rooms because we minister to each other. Our benches or chairs face each other because we are all equal before God. We have no prearranged prayers, readings, sermons, hymns, or musical orchestrations because we wait for God's leadings (guidance and direction) and power in our lives.

During worship, a message may come to us. Friends have found that messages may be for our personal reflection or for sharing on another occasion. Or they may be a leading to stand and speak. Friends value spoken messages that come from the heart and are prompted by the Spirit, and we also value the silence we share together. Following a spoken message, we return to the silence to examine ourselves in the Light of that message. Meeting for worship ends when one Friend, designated in advance, shakes hands with his or her neighbors. Then everyone shakes hands. No two meetings are ever the same.

Like our style of worship, Quaker theology also differs from other religions. Because creeds could never fully represent all revelation and could limit or confine our perceptions of truth, Friends write no creeds. Instead, we write queries (probing questions) that help us reflect on our beliefs and actions; and yearly meetings, which are regional organizations of local

congregations (known as monthly meetings), record our common values and experiences in manuals entitled Faith and Practice.

Without creeds, Friends have become diverse in our beliefs about God. Nonetheless, Friends common experience of God's presence within and among us has led us to realize that there is that of God, or something of the Divine, in everyone. This realization is central to Quakerism. It is confirmed in testimonies in the Bible and referred to by Friends with such terms as "the Christ Within," "the Inward Light," and "the Seed of Truth." As Friends have attempted to respond to that of God within, some common values have arisen that unite us.

Among them, Friends value life as sacred. Because we recognize that there is that of God in everyone, Friends try to avoid violence. We have found that when we hurt others, we also harm ourselves and deny that of God in us. With God's guidance, we try, instead, to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts and differences and to help others through service, the promotion of social and economic justice, kindness in daily living, and the support of each other's search for that of God within.

Similarly, Friends experience of that of God within has led us to understand that God's inward guiding presence is universal. Anyone anywhere can experience God directly. Quakerism is just one way to know God, and authentic expressions of God's leadings are also found in other religions.

Early Friends quickly realized that both men and women experience this presence and became the first religious group to recognize the equality of women and men before God. Consequently, since our beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, Quaker men and women have shared equally in the work of Friends, and Quaker schools have educated both girls and boys.

Because Friends recognize that there is that of God in everyone, Friends appreciate that anyone at any time may express God's leadings. Therefore, revelation, or messages from God, is

continuous. Friends affirm that God inspired the writing of the Bible and other sacred literature and is still inspiring us. Although we are not always receptive, God continues to reveal Divine guidance and unchanging truth to all of us today, just as in the past.

To be more receptive to revelation, Friends practice simplicity and integrity. For Friends, simplicity is putting God first in one's life. Simplicity requires clear priorities and often inspires plainness and lack of clutter. Simplicity persuades one to affirm, not to flatter or overplay words or emotions, and to avoid extravagance and paraphernalia. Simplicity requires integrity, which is honesty in all dealings, telling the truth on all occasions, and consistent adherence to one's values. Simplicity and integrity have much in common: just as simplicity avoids cluttering one's environment, integrity avoids complicating one's relationships.

Simplicity and integrity bring us closer to the truth, and truth is of such importance to us that our original name, based upon John 15:15, was "The Religious Society of the Friends of Truth." The experience of living truthfully inspired George Fox, one of our founders, to refuse to swear an oath in court. Fox maintained that swearing to tell the truth on one occasion implies that there are other occasions when one would not tell the truth. He also followed the biblical admonition against swearing (Matthew 5:34-37).

Another consequence of Friends search for truth is that scientific discoveries do not tend to challenge the basis of our faith. Like the scientific method, Quaker faith and practice rely upon experience as a guide. We come to know truth experientially. The search for truth is more important to us than the maintenance of beliefs, and so we try to remain open to new approaches to the truth. As the insights of others can provide new approaches to the truth, Friends bring our personal revelations to our communities for discernment and "clearness."

Our search for truth has further confirmed that "way opens," situations change or circumstances develop, enabling us to find the direction in which God is leading us. As we move

in that direction, specific steps forward, which were not previously known to us, become apparent. When the way does not open, we question if we have correctly understood our leading. In our corporate search for truth, Friends use the worshipful Quaker process of decision making, a process for finding unity in all decisions that affect our communities. For Friends, unity is not usually unanimity, which is agreement without dissent. Unity is more often agreement that acknowledges dissent, staying together despite differences, and moving forward with guidance from our common values.

To help achieve unity, a member of the meeting, appointed as clerk, listens for "a sense of the meeting." When the clerk has a sense of the meeting, he or she composes a minute that Friends agree with or modify. Achieving unity sometimes means that, occasionally, out of respect for the wisdom of the community, one or more dissenting members may "stand aside."

Standing aside occurs when one allows a decision-with which one is not entirely comfortable but for which one has no moral misgivings-to go forward. On the other hand, the community knows that it must listen carefully to heartfelt dissent, as God's leading may come through any one of us. For Friends, staying together despite differences is an important aspect of community, and we realize that the more differing opinions we consider, the more closely we may come to the truth.

While invigorating, Quaker diversity is not usually easy. The differing opinions and beliefs of individual Friends are challenging to many Friends and to many Friends meetings. Although Friends have our roots in Christianity, some individual Friends do not call themselves Christians. Moreover, those Friends who are Christians may have differing definitions of Christianity. We have unitarian and trinitarian Friends, evangelical and nonevangelical Friends. Some Friends attend other religious services as well as meeting for worship.

Despite our diversity, Friends find that we can live in accordance with our common values. When we do, our values become our testimonies, or witness, to the world. Friends

testimonies on peace, equality, simplicity, integrity, truth, community, and diversity have evolved over time and are the outward expressions of Friends attempts to turn our idealism into action.

Friends value and pursue actions that reflect our ideals. Not only do Friends expect that we can live divinely inspired lives, but also we expect that, with Divine power and guidance, we can attain social justice and peace on earth.

That we do not always attain the ideal does not mean we will not continue to strive for it. Consequently, in our meetings for worship and business and in our daily lives, Friends try to manifest our common values:

- life is sacred;
- God's inward presence is experienced universally;
- revelation is continuous;
- simplicity, integrity, community and diversity are essential in the search for truth;
- seeking truth and unity are goals for worship and business;
- the way opens, making the ideal attainable.

These values follow from our realization that there is that of God in everyone.

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