

Companioning in Ministry

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Traveling in the ministry with a companion has been a practice that goes back to the very early days of Friends, when the so-called Valiant Sixty went out in pairs to spread the good news that "Christ is come to teach his people himself." Long before that time, Jesus sent out his disciples two by two to "proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt. 10: NRSV; see also, Matt. 10:5-10ff; Luke 10:1-20).

Although within many FGC meetings over the last century traveling in the ministry became replaced by "intervisitation", in the last decade or so many Friends have been feeling nudged by the Spirit to travel in the ministry. Throughout FGC and beyond, Friends are finding a rekindled interest in learning how to nurture travel in the ministry. The FGC Traveling Ministries Program has been a part of this work. We all have the opportunity to go again to the same Teacher who taught the earlier generations of Friends, and who sent out those first disciples.

We are finding that while many believe they know what to expect from Friends traveling in the ministry, they often are not as familiar with the work of companions in ministry. While the specific form of the role of the companion in ministry may vary, a major spiritual task of the companion is to hold the minister and the gathering in prayer. This begins as soon as the companion accepts the assignment to travel. Long before the actual travel begins, the companion holds the visit in prayer, asking God to provide the message that is needed, to prepare ears and hearts to receive it, and to guide the minister in delivering it faithfully.

During the visit the companion in ministry models prayerful attentiveness, holding the minister and the meeting in the Light. Often the companion in ministry neither contributes outwardly to the discussion nor helps shape the delivery of the ministry, although this can vary as moved by the Spirit or as called for by the relationship between the two Friends. The traveling companion pays attention to assure that the minister gets the spiritual and physical rest needed to be able to stay open to the Spirit and remain faithful during the visit.

The presence of a companion gives the person traveling in the ministry someone with whom to seek discernment of the Spirit, test leadings, and seek prayerful support. Especially if the person traveling in the ministry has been invited to speak or lead a time of retreat he or she may ask the companion in ministry to join in discerning through prayer and conversation the extent of faithfulness—or not—to the leadings of the Spirit. It can be extremely valuable for the person traveling in the ministry to be able to compare his or her discernment of what is happening.

The relationship between the two Friends traveling can take a variety of forms. It may be fluid as both discern what the Spirit is directing them to do in the moment. We are finding that neither humans nor the Spirit fit very well inside tight boxes. Sometimes two Friends are called to travel in the ministry and work together, moving back and forth between leadership and companion roles. Sometimes a Friend not as experienced in travel may accompany a more seasoned Friend to serve as support and at the same time season their own calling.

The committee charged with the support of the Traveling Ministries Program has chosen to use the term “companion in ministry,” though some Friends have been using the term “elder” to describe the role of the travel companion. In the past, an elder was understood as a Friend who is steeped in the wisdom of Friends’ tradition, who has a long-term concern for the spiritual life of the body, and is gifted with discernment. In the best of our tradition, elders were those whose discernment was depended upon by ministers to help the latter stay close to the Guide. In the context of today’s experiments with travel in the ministry, we soon discovered that things went better when Friends traveled in pairs. Next we began to discover some of the gifts that were especially helpful in the companion in ministry. These included discernment of the spiritual condition of the group being visited and of the one ministering, a close care for the physical needs of the main traveler (aka minister), etc.

More recently, as Friends have continued to use the term “elder” to describe the travel companion, some of us have grown uneasy because of the divergence between the new connotations and the traditional understanding of an elder’s gifts and function. Traditionally an elder was understood to have received gifts for the spiritual growth and nurture of his or her local meeting. That is where the elder’s often quiet and nearly invisible work took place. If an elder moved to another meeting, his or her recording as an elder was not transferred. It remained to be seen if the gifts needed for the new meeting would be given, or not. Ministers, on the other hand, were expected to exercise their gifts at home and abroad. Their recording went with them if they moved. The TMC has become uneasy that our use of the term “elder” to refer to the personal companion of someone traveling in the ministry would obscure the necessary work of nurturing spiritual growth in a local meeting. Although very few FGC-affiliated meetings still recognize or name elders, that does not mean the work of mentoring, nurturing, admonishing, and helping does not occur. The TMP does not want to hinder the rediscovery or naming of this important function.
