

Some Quaker Voices about Vocal Ministry

The end of words is to bring us to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.

Isaac Penington, 1670

Friends have from the outset taken seriously the New Testament injunction that all believers are priests. That is, they are to be vehicles of communication to each other in a redemptive community in which we have, in fact, abolished the laity and are all ministers. If this is true then no one should come to meeting quite certain that he will not speak. "Let none of us assume that vocal ministry is never to be our part" is what the Advices say. It is our feeling that it is equally unfortunate if someone comes in advance quite certain that he or she will minister. Rather we are meant to come to meeting in openness.

Douglas Steere, 1972

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.

Marrienne McMullen, 1987

Waiting upon the Holy Spirit in silent expectation and prayer is the basis of our meeting for worship. Vocal ministry should arise out of a sense of being inwardly moved to share a message aloud. Sometimes a message is not ripe yet, or comes clearly but is meant only for the person receiving it, not for the group. Some Friends are led to speak frequently, and others only rarely; yet the timid or brief message of one who seldom speaks may be as moving and helpful as that of a more practiced speaker. The experienced speaker should be watchful not to speak too often or at undue length. No Friend should come to meeting for worship with an intention to speak or not to speak. The most satisfactory vocal ministry arises out of a leading that is felt in the silence so strongly that it cannot be ignored. It should be delivered with as few words as possible, yet as many as necessary. Vocal prayer offered on behalf of the gathered meeting can also bring us into closer harmony with God.

Baltimore Faith & Practice, 1988

Some think, through a mistaken judgment, that they must be doing something every meeting, (like the preachers of the letter, who must either be singing, preaching or praying all the time) and by such a conduct they lose their interest and place in the hearts of friends by too long and too frequent appearing in both preaching and prayer: For the avoiding of which, keep close to thy gift, intently waiting to know thy place, both when to speak and when to be silent; and when thou speakest, begin under a sense of divine influence, whether it be in preaching or praying; and without it, do not either preach or pray.

Samuel Bownas, 1750

In Friends' meetings also, from the fact that everyone is free to speak, one hears harmonies and correspondences between very various utterances such as are scarcely to be met elsewhere. It is sometimes as part-singing compared with unison. The free admission of the ministry of women, of course, greatly enriches this harmony. I have often wondered whether some of the motherly counsels I have listened to in our meeting would not reach some hearts that might be closed to the masculine preacher.

Caroline E Stephen, 1890

Offer whatever you have to God, and be prepared to let it go. ... Nowadays if words come to my mind I try to remember to pray, "O Lord, if this is not for this time and place, please take it from me," and very often he does.

Beatrice Saxon Snell, 1965

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, and to answer 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 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.

John Edward Southall, c 1900

The spiritual exercises of the meeting may include spoken words. No one should go to a Friends' meeting with the definite expectation either of speaking or of not speaking. We should be open to dealing appropriately with whatever may be laid upon us by the Spirit of Truth and Life.

Howard H. Brinton, 1942

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

As the worshiper sits in silence some message may arise out of the depth of the soul that by its nature is intended not simply for the worshiper but for the gathering as a whole. If it is left unexpressed, the worshiper feels burdened with a sense of omission, but if it is faithfully uttered, the worshiper feels a sense of clearness and relief. This peculiar sense of urgency is usually the sign of divine requirement. There is no sure or single test of guidance. As sensitive persons, we learn to recognize the call as clearly as we recognize the voice of a friend. We know our friend's voice even though we may be quite unable to describe its quality. A clear conviction that the need of the meeting or of some persons in it or even that our own need requires that words be uttered is often the only assurance when there is doubt. Though a message may seem intellectually fitting it should not be given unless it glows with life.

Howard H. Brinton, 1942

Our worship is our gift to God,
Ministry through words is God's gift to us.
As we seek the Presence,
Let us honor these gifts by testing our leadings to speak,
Discerning that they are truly guided by the Holy Spirit
That they are messages for the assembled body
And not ourselves alone,
And by allowing each message to settle
Into the heart of those who need it
By keeping silence between each ministry.
Let us allow ourselves to be gathered
By the power and grace of the light.

Friends General Conference, 1995 Gathering

Gradually I realized that the most powerful ministry is a wordless radiation of the Love of God. As I began to experience this secret, undramatic, invisible ministry flowing out from me, I realized that my sometimes dramatic gifts in the ministry had depended all along on the secret, silent ministry of a woman here or a man there who never spoke in meeting. With humility I came to understand how their ministry of being deeply present to God and then radiating the Love of Jesus Christ is the most important ministry of all, for it helps everyone in the meeting to come into a state of living communion and transformation. Words are important of course - they can be a matter of life and death - but they are only words. What really counts is the powerful transformation of human character which can occur in a meeting deeply gathered into the body of Christ.

Bill Taber, 1998

Upon Friends is laid a double responsibility in their communal worship. They are not only hearers and partakers of the Word of Life, but each must be prepared, if the call comes, to share that Word in words to his fellows.

Beatrice Saxon Snell, 1965

My piece was pat and all ready to say,
She rose first. I threw my piece away.
My well-turned stuff
Was not so rough
As hers, but easy elegant and smooth.
Beginning middle end
It had theme and point
And aptly quoted prophet priest and poet.
Hers was uncouth
Wanting in art
Labour'd scarce-audible and out of joint.
Three times she lost the thread
And sitting left her message half unsaid.
'Why then did thee throw it
Into the discard?'
Friend, It had head (Like this).
Hers, oh hers had heart.

Robert Hewison, 1965

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 to 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 upon me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offence, 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