

Vocal Ministry and Faithful Listening

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Just as careful preparation enhances the quality of worship, so too does attention to the Light during worship. Friends come to worship to receive and to give, to speak when led, to be silent when that is what obedience requires. Vocal ministry is a vital part of the Meeting for Worship. It is a form of service in which a person stands to share a message from God delivered through the individual. Friends hope that all spoken messages during worship are in fact vocal ministry. The responsibility rests on each member of the group to be ready and willing to offer such ministry when called to do so.

As one sits in silence, a message may arise out of the depth of the soul that seems intended not simply for the worshiper, but for the gathering as a whole. Some Friends feel burdened with a sense of omission if a message is not expressed, but once it is faithfully uttered, a sense of inward peace may follow. Experience in Meeting helps to discriminate between private words and those that arise as true leadings of the Spirit that should not be silenced. An inclination to share a message may arise in advance of Meeting, but the decision to speak should await a clear leading at the time. With practice, a person may learn to discern a call clearly, though many are quite unable to describe its quality.

Some worshipers called to speak feel an internal or external quaking, deep emotion, tears, an increased heart rate, or other agitation. Some have felt grabbed by the hand of God and held until after delivering the message. One person feels a profound stillness accompanied by a clear voice that is not her own. Another may find himself suddenly standing, and then wait, praying silently for guidance, before beginning to speak. Still another may test a message by repeatedly pushing it 'out of mind' only to find that it returns again and again.

As one is weighing whether to speak, certain questions may be helpful: Is this message Spirit-led, or merely emotionally compelling? Is this message intended for this group, or is it only for me? Is it better saved until another time or place? When the call to speak is clear, the worshiper should stand if possible. He or she should speak simply, briefly, audibly, and from personal spiritual experience. Occasionally, ministry may take the form of singing or of standing silently. Neither debate, nor discussion with previous speakers, is ever appropriate, and speaking twice during a single Meeting for Worship is very seldom so.

Those who are led to speak have different backgrounds, verbal skills and interpretive power. Friends try to listen more than they speak, keep an open heart, seek the Spirit behind the words and hold the speaker in love. Listeners may find it helpful to pray that the messenger is faithful to the call, and that God's word will emerge through the medium of human speech. A message that does not speak to one person's needs may be helpful to another. After a message has been given, it is important to allow time to ponder its meaning, letting the Spirit move through the assembly of Friends before another ministers.

On Vocal Ministry: Two Perspectives

by Diane Bonner and Carol Holmes
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These words are offered as two Friends' understanding and experience. They are not perfect or final nor are they meant to be. As you will read, they don't even agree. We hope that they speak to your condition and inward yearning.

Part I (by Diane Bonner)

I attended my first meeting for worship approximately 45 years ago. Ever since then, I have been living into the question: What exactly does it mean to worship in the manner of unprogrammed Friends? Here is a distillation of my experience of vocal ministry, a practice to which I admit I am not often called.

I enter the meeting room and sit with a Bible near at hand. I soon begin the process of worship by stilling my body. After some time of such mindfulness, my "running mind" settles down, and the remainder of the meeting is spent trying to stay open and to listen inwardly. When vocal ministry is offered by others, I listen unless it becomes clear that the ministry is not meant for me--in which case, I struggle not to listen, for the spoken words become intrusive to my reach for stillness.

On the few occasions when I feel the burden of vocal ministry, I engage in the following process:

First, words come to me from my midsection. They do not begin because I think them with my brain; they emerge from my body. They are incarnated. The words are usually just a few—a phrase—and they are accompanied by a suddenly pounding heart.

The words deepen.

My hands at some point begin to shake. I test the words: are they for everyone? Are they simple, nonviolent, honest, and, most important, are these words worth breaking the Silence? These tests follow my understanding of our testimonies. I know that some words that are, to me, neutral in emotional energy can be very violent to others, and if I think the ministry is for everyone and I want it to be heard, I try to avoid such words. Authentic substitutes have always made themselves available.

Then I begin to pray earnestly: God, take this ministry away. Please. I don't want to stand up. I don't want to speak. I feel very vulnerable and afraid. Please. Take this ministry away.

But the weight of the words, along with the feeling that if I don't stand my heart will burst from my chest, force me to my feet.

As I speak, my eyes are usually closed; my heart settles to its more normal rate. I listen inwardly for what I am to say next, as if I were a stranger to the speaker. Before I stand, I may have a beginning (the phrase that first emerged from my midsection), a middle, and an end. However, there have been times when the ministry has taken a shift in a very different direction from where I thought it was going.

When I finish, when the words come to an end, I stand still for a very short time before I sit. At this point, I feel surrounded by a deep, soft, protective stillness, and I feel released and oddly faithful, even if I think that the words I've offered have missed the mark. Also, I feel very vulnerable, and if someone speaks too soon afterward, their words

can cut through the stillness and hurt. After a while, this deep stillness lifts, and I open my eyes.

I understand ministry to be that which brings me closer to the Spirit, to the felt sense of Presence (see Genesis 17:1 and Exodus 33:14). I have never experienced commentary on the Sunday *New York Times* to be ministry. For me, vocal ministry is not group therapy (a wonderful practice in itself, but usually secular). Vocal ministry is not a word from our sponsor, the ego; nor is it clever reflection on the season, the room, or our silence, as poetic as these can be. Vocal ministry is especially not political exhortation to action or admonition / correction of a previous speaker's message.

I ask: Have the words spoken by me or another Friend brought us closer to the Spirit? Will they help us remember that we are not alone, perhaps even that we're not in charge?

It takes practice, discipline, and study to learn how to sit and wait upon the Spirit—practice, discipline, and study to discern which words we are called to speak and which words we are to allow to dissolve unspoken.

And now, two messages from beloved George Fox:

Therefore, all wait patiently upon the Lord, whatsoever condition you be in; wait... .

Dear Friends, dwell in the Light.

The stillness of our unprogrammed worship is not about the absence of sound; it is about a stillness that contains the potential for the Presence to emerge; and it will emerge—in its own time. Our practice, discipline, and study increase the opportunity both for the Presence to become felt and for us to hear and obey. Conversely, the absence of practice, discipline, and study decreases this opportunity.

Part II (by Carol Holmes) The Disciplines of Vocal Ministry

We gather together in silent meeting for worship to listen to a God who speaks. Over the years, disciplines have evolved that help us hear "the still, small voice." When observed, these disciplines will open us and bring us more deeply into the silence, into a place and condition where we can hear God.

1. If you feel the urge to rise and speak in meeting, ask where the urge is coming from. Is it a personal need? an emotional need? The silent meeting for worship is not a place for this kind of sharing.

2. Is the urge to speak accompanied by unfamiliar physical sensations? Are the palms of your hands warm? Not sweating, but warm. Is your heart beating in a very slow, insistent way? Not pounding or racing with anxiety, but distinctly slowed down and steady. It is possible to be called to minister without such physical changes in the body, but it is unusual. If some kind of physical sign is not present, see if you can resist the urge to speak.

3. Test yourself by asking, "Is this a message I am meant to contemplate myself or is this for the assembled meeting to hear?" If the answer is that it is for the assembled meeting, do not stand up. Wait a period of time, at least five minutes, and ask the same question. If the answer comes back that it is for the assembled meeting, do not stand up. If after another five minutes the urge to speak is still with you, pause again and then rise to offer the message.

4. If vocal ministry has been offered, the meeting will need time to absorb the message back into the silence and the message will need time to deepen the silence. Do not rise to speak immediately after someone else. Haste and urgency to speak often indicate an ego need or an intellectual idea—"a notion," as early Friends called it. Step aside and let the Holy Spirit breathe through the meeting.

5. If you hear a message, or some situation arises, that you think will be upsetting to others, and you want to comfort them, rest from that anxiety. You don't need to rescue, help, or fix the meeting for worship. Put that burden down. Trust.

6. Finally, as Friends have advised each other over the centuries, speak only if you can improve on the silence.

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