

Meeting for Worship

Introduction

Friends in Illinois Yearly Meeting engage in “waiting worship,” in which we gather silently to enter into communion with God and with one another and to seek God’s help and guidance in ministering to our own spiritual needs, those of the meeting community and those of the wider world. Meeting for worship begins when the first worshiper enters the room. As Friends enter the meeting room, they seek to still their minds, leaving behind the concerns and activities of their daily life, and to focus inward and enter a period of expectant waiting. After a substantial period of silence anyone present who feels led by the Divine Spirit to speak may rise and do so. Friends speak spontaneously as led rather than composing a message in advance of coming to meeting for worship. This vocal ministry is typically followed by a period of silence to deepen the worship and allow those present to take in what has been said. When enough time has passed another Friend may feel led to speak. Sometimes the entire meeting may pass in outward silence. The meeting ends with the shaking of hands.

Preparing for meeting for worship

Preparation for the next meeting for worship begins with the closing of the previous meeting. Friends seek God outside of meeting for worship by engaging in personal reflection, prayer or meditation, journaling, and reading the Bible or other spiritual literature. Friends who engage in such spiritual practices may more readily enter worship prepared in mind and spirit. Taking time from the busyness of life to experience even brief moments of awareness of God’s presence sows the seed for deeper spiritual engagement. Meetings are encouraged to provide opportunities for Friends to share the spiritual dimensions of their lives, by organizing retreats, workshops, spiritual nurture groups, or other gatherings.

While engaging in spiritual practices prepares one to enter more readily and deeply into worship, so too do the things one does immediately prior to coming to meeting for worship. Allowing sufficient time to travel to the meeting place helps one arrive in a calm and unhurried state of mind. Parents may want to help their children prepare for the experience of worship or educational programs at meeting. Friends may hold the meeting in prayer, read the Bible or other spiritual literature, or simply quiet their minds and turn inward. Reading the newspaper, attending to media, or dealing with the stresses of secular life immediately before meeting for worship may distract one from spiritual matters and interfere with the capacity to perceive accurately the promptings of God’s Spirit.

Beginning meeting

So Friends, when you come together to wait upon God, come orderly...: the first that enters into the place of your meeting, be not careless, nor wander up and down, either in body or mind; but innocently sit down in some place, and turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart, sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the Spirit: and so all the rest coming in... sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light; a few that are thus gathered by the

arm of the Lord into the unity of the Spirit,— this is a sweet and precious meeting, where all meet with the Lord!...In such a meeting, where the presence and power of God is felt, there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here: and this is the end of all words and writings — to bring people to the eternal living Word.

Alexander Parker, 1659

Except in small meetings held in homes, worship begins once the first person enters the meeting space. As more Friends enter they do so silently, joining the worship. This practice allows others to enter already experiencing a sense of the living silence. After the meeting has settled into worship, a query or short passage may be read aloud by a designated individual.

Centering

As the meeting gathers into worship, we strive to release the events of the week and the stirrings of our minds, moving into an inward stillness where we unite with Friends in communal worship.

For some Friends the process of “centering,” of spontaneously emptying the mind and listening for the promptings of the Spirit, is difficult. Some have engaged in various practices to still their minds so that the Divine Presence can be felt, heard and obeyed. The practices that work for one may not work for another; however, the practices that are described here have been found to be helpful in centering at the beginning of worship. Positioning the body in a restful yet alert position is a starting point. Many Friends sit with their feet on the floor and with hands in their lap. Some Friends keep their eyes open; others close them. Few people can achieve inward stillness immediately but find instead that they must release impediments gradually. Some pray; some hold each person in the room in the Light; some engage in self-examination; some contemplate mental images; and others may silently repeat a passage. Through these means, one loses the complexity of thought, focuses inwardly and enters a period of expectant waiting. The particular technique is less important than is the creation of a condition of being fully present. Even a few Friends who are centered can enable others to more readily reach that state of consciousness as they remember that they are already in the presence of God. Those at a meeting for worship generally experience a deepening of the quality of the silence as the meeting settles.

When distractions occur during meeting for worship, individual Friends or the community as a whole may need to work to re-center on the movements of the Spirit. Distractions may take the form of outward disturbances or of unsettling thoughts or feelings. When dealing with distractions, it is helpful to turn back to a place of expectant waiting rather than trying to suppress the distracting thoughts.

Communal worship

For when I came into the *silent assemblies* of God’s people, I felt a *secret power* among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life...

Robert Barclay, 1676

As the worship deepens those present open themselves as a faith community to the Spirit of God. We seek a direct relationship with God, to discern what God is calling us to do. We still our minds to open our understanding as freely as possible from the obscuring effects of our own rationalizations, emotions and ego. The analytic mind gives way to an awareness of the workings of the Spirit. It is within this corporate experience that a sense of unity with those worshipping and with the Spirit is felt.

This discernment is a communal, collective process that differs in important ways from individual meditation. Some Friends find that reading or journaling can help them center or deepen their worship. However, such activities may have an isolating effect, diminishing participation in the communal character of our worship. All in attendance have a responsibility for the quality of worship, humbly listening together for how God is leading us.

Vocal ministry

Whatever a man does or says or thinks in matters pertaining to divine worship must be done under the special impulse, inspiration, and influence of God... For, in order to perform true public worship properly, every worshipper ought to listen with the deepest quietness of mind to the internal strivings of the divine Spirit in his heart; so that as the Spirit prompts, leads, and assists he will either prophesy or pray or render thanks, or perform some other duty of divine worship. And in this way not only he but also the worship offered by him will be both pleasing to God and altogether beneficial to the worshipper himself and to the entire Church of God.

Robert Barclay, 1675

Any worshipper present in meeting may experience the influence of the Holy Spirit or Spirit of God leading them to speak. It is important when feeling led in this way to discern whether the call to speak is authentic. A rightly led message advances the spiritual life of the community and of its individual members. The speaker serves as an instrument through which the Spirit ministers; the message pulls others into the stream of the Living Waters, deepening the worship.

There is no set procedure or inviolable rule for determining when or how to speak, but the following advices can be helpful:

- Friends speak as they are led to do so by the Divine Spirit. Friends often experience a call to speak as something that may be resisted but cannot be held back. A Friend who feels impelled to speak should do so. Some Friends find that the call to speak may be accompanied by trembling or a quickening of the heart.
- Often Friends don't have a well formed message as they begin to speak but rather have a few words or phrases that may shift in focus as the ministry is being shared. This results from speaking spontaneously as led rather than crafting a message in advance. Friends are encouraged to speak even if the message is not fully composed.
- What one speaks in meeting for worship arises out of one's own experience. When speaking of spiritual matters, share based on what you know first-hand.
- Speak as ministry to the meeting rather than as therapy to yourself. Avoid focusing on your own personal or emotional needs.

- Ministry is of a religious or spiritual nature. While a religious life has political and intellectual consequences that may give rise to vocal ministry, messages are best delivered in a manner that emphasizes their spiritual grounding. Friends are tenderly cautioned to avoid giving messages that only promote a political agenda, rally people to a cause, or present an intellectual system of theology.
- Messages may continue a thread from ministry delivered earlier in a meeting. However, it is usually best to avoid responding directly to a previous message. Give other speakers the benefit of the doubt that they are speaking from a leading. If their contribution seems wrong to you, consider what there might be of value in it, rather than correcting or debating.
- An individual may discern an authentic message that is solely for himself or herself not to be verbally shared with the assembled body. The individual should rest in the knowledge that such unspoken messages are an invaluable part of the worship experience.
- Friends are tenderly advised to speak loudly and clearly enough to be understood. Except in very small meetings it is normal to rise when speaking in order to be heard.
- A period of silence traditionally follows vocal ministry. Others who wish to speak are urged to wait until the meeting has had time to absorb the previous message back into the silence.
- When many Friends offer vocal ministry with little silence between messages, a Friend may rise and remain silent as a way of enabling the meeting to re-experience waiting worship.
- A person does not generally speak more than once in a given meeting for worship.
- Messages are best stated simply.

Some Friends engage in vocal ministry with some frequency; others find that they are seldom called to speak. Both those who engage in vocal ministry and those that do not are equally called to active participation in the meeting. Those who provide silent ministry help the meeting to reach or maintain a state of focused, attentive waiting on the presence of God.

The absence or presence of vocal ministry is not in itself a reflection of the quality of worship. Deep listening lies at the heart of Quaker worship. Entirely silent meetings can be the most powerful.

The gathered meeting

In the Quaker practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when an electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, and a quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits with a super-individual Life and Power — an objective, dynamic Presence which enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens in us depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground.

Thomas R. Kelly, 1940

When the presence of the Spirit is deeply experienced during a particular meeting for worship, the meeting is sometimes called a “gathered” or “covered” meeting. In a gathered meeting, one experiences a strong sense of being united with others and with God. The meeting may be silent, or Friends may deliver messages that parallel one’s own stream of thought or speak to a similar concern or question. Some Friends describe the experience of a gathered

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meeting as being immersed in the Living Stream. When leaving a gathered meeting, Friends often feel a deep sense of grounding and connection with God.

Closing meeting

Ideally, meeting for worship ends when the assembled Friends collectively feel a sense of conclusion and release. While in present day practice, a meeting for worship is often scheduled to last an hour, there may be times when there is a sense that worship needs to end earlier or continue longer. The clerk of the meeting, a member of the worship and ministry or other similar committee, or some other designated person is given responsibility for discerning when the meeting is free to conclude and signals this by offering to shake hands with a nearby person. Others present then shake hands with those around them unless it is strongly felt that the meeting needs to continue.

There are several different practices that may follow the end of meeting for worship. In some meetings there is a time to express joys and sorrows; in others a time to make prayer requests. In larger meetings, a member of the worship and ministry or some similar committee will introduce himself or herself so that Friends who have concerns or questions may share them after the rise of meeting. Some meetings ask all those present to introduce themselves; others ask that newcomers or those who have been absent for a period of time introduce themselves to the body. As a final practice, most meetings allow time for announcements. These may be given by the individual most involved in the activity or event to be shared. In other cases, announcements may be provided to the clerk or other designated individual to read. Following announcements there is often a time for conversation and an opportunity to get to know newcomers. Taking this time is valuable for building a sense of community in the meeting.

Logistics

In many meetings, Friends gather for worship once a week on First Day (Sunday). A number of meetings also hold mid-week worship.

Some meetings hold worship in their own meetinghouses. Other meetings hold worship in a rented space, still others in their homes. The location should be carefully selected to avoid distractions which may make it hard to center. Regardless of the space in which meeting for worship occurs, the general layout of the room is similar: chairs or benches are generally arranged so that people are facing one another.

Someone may be designated to greet people as they arrive. Many meetings have pamphlets available for newcomers that briefly describe the form of Quaker worship. In some meetings, those arriving late enter the meeting room as soon as they arrive. In other meetings, there is a designated space where latecomers gather and begin to center, which serves to minimize disruptions to the deepening silence. Then, at a designated time, often fifteen minutes into worship, they enter the meeting room. Even if this is not the practice of a particular meeting, latecomers should refrain from entering the meeting room while someone is offering vocal ministry.

Children are welcome to attend the entire meeting for worship. Often, children attend either the first fifteen minutes of meeting or the last fifteen minutes. Such decisions are made with consideration of the experience that the meeting seeks the children to have. As children mature, they are encouraged to participate in the entire meeting for worship.

Dealing with problems in meeting for worship

The quality of worship is compromised if some worshippers feel that their vocal ministry, though Spirit-led, would not be welcome in meeting for worship. Meetings need to be aware when they are creating an environment that has the effect of discouraging some voices or perspectives. Individuals who feel silenced are encouraged to bring their concerns to the worship and ministry committee or its equivalent.

There are also times when the behavior of a particular individual interferes with the quality of worship. Sometimes a Friend may engage in frequent vocal ministry, the content, length or tone of which is disruptive. To address such situations, the worship and ministry or other similar committee should consider how to proceed. In making a determination as to how to respond to this person's behavior, consideration is given to the degree to which it affects the quality of worship. The meeting should take care to hold the disruptive worshiper in the Light and to treat her or him tenderly and with compassion. Meetings would also do well to consider how they would deal with an unexpected instance of disruptive behavior before one actually occurs. (See worship and ministry committee, pp. xx-xx.)

Queries on meeting for worship

For the individual:

- How do you prepare for meeting for worship?
- Do you arrive at meeting on time?
- Do you enter the meeting room in a manner which does not disturb the worship which has already begun?
- Do you come to meeting neither determined to speak nor determined not to speak?
- Do you wait to speak until you feel led?
- When you feel led, do you speak? If not, what holds you back?
- Do you listen with an open heart to the messages which are offered in worship?
- How can meeting be a source of help when you feel disconnected from the Divine?
- Do you carry the experience of meeting for worship into your daily life?

For the meeting as a whole:

- What does your meeting do to increase the depth of meeting for worship?
- Does the quality of vocal ministry in your meeting contribute to the quality of worship?
- Do Friends in your meeting find that they are spiritually refreshed, enriched and sustained by meeting for worship?
- How does meeting for worship nourish the spiritual growth of your meeting community?
- Is your meeting open to the diversity of messages that may arise as vocal ministry?
- Do Friends in your meeting feel safe to speak as led?

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Sources for Quotes

p. 1, “So Friends, when you come together to wait upon God, come orderly...”: Alexander Parker to Friends, in *Letters, &c. of Early Friends*, pp. 365–366, ed. by Abram R. Barclay. Harvey and Darton, London, 1841.

p. 2, “For when I came into the *silent assemblies* of God’s people...”: Robert Barclay, *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity, as the Same is Preached and Held Forth by the People Called in Scorn Quakers*, in *Truth Triumphant through the Spiritual Warfare, Christian Labours, and Writings, of that Able and Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ, Robert Barclay*, vol.2, p. 357. Benjamin C. Stanton, New York, 1831.

p. 3, “Whatever a man does or says or thinks in matters pertaining to divine worship...”: Robert Barclay, quoted (p. 32) in Dean Freiday, ‘Barclay’s Reply to Arnoldus’, *Quaker History* 68:1.20–32, 1979.

p. 4, “In the Quaker practice of group worship on the basis of silence...”: Thomas Kelly, ‘The Gathered Meeting’, in *The Eternal Promise*, p. 43. Friends United Press, Richmond, Indiana, 2006.