

Recognizing Spiritual Gifts and Leadings – 10/7/2017

All Friends are called into a ministry sooner or later, whether public or private, in word or deed or silent prayer, of long duration or short.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, 1993

All Friends are called to minister to others, but not all are called to do so in the same way. Offering a vocal message during meeting for worship is the best-known form of Quaker ministry, but it is far from the only one. Ministry may involve caring for those who are ill, teaching First Day school, or helping with hospitality for the meeting's events. These forms of ministry rarely call for formal recognition, but they serve to deepen the covenant community that is at the core of every Friends meeting.

Ministry is most effective when it takes place in accordance with one's gifts and leadings. In Quaker parlance, a "gift" is a God-given ability that is intended to be used for spiritual purposes, while a "leading" is a call to action based on a Friend's sense that God has led her or him to take on a particular cause, for example pastoral counseling or chaplaincy in a prison or hospital. Such leadings typically emerge as a result of prayerful consideration of a concern, and they often reflect the gifts of the person who is led to act on them.

In some cases, a gift or leading may call for special recognition and/or support from a Friend's home meeting. Historically, this occurred when a meeting formally acknowledged that one of its members had a gift of spoken ministry and saw fit to "record" that Friend as a minister. Early Quakers felt called to support such members spiritually and practically, often "releasing" those recorded ministers so that they could travel in the ministry for the benefit of the entire Religious Society of Friends. Few Quaker meetings record ministers nowadays, but some still do; and many more formally recognize and support the leadings of their members without recording them as ministers.

Some meetings within ILYM have adopted procedures regarding recognition of leadings and/or recording of ministers, and others might wish to do so. In all cases, such procedures should be regarded as suggestive rather than definitive: while they often prove to be helpful, they cannot replace prayerful discernment by the meeting community.

Recognition of Leadings

Monthly meetings are occasionally called upon to discern whether to formally recognize the leading of an individual Friend. Such recognition means that the meeting agrees to take that leading under its care. A Friend who wishes to have the meeting take a leading under its care engages in the meeting's processes of spiritual discernment, which normally involve the meeting's care and counsel committee (see Section xx-xx).

A clearness committee appointed by the care and counsel committee (or by the meeting as a whole, if the monthly meeting is too small to have such a committee) undertakes discernment on whether the Friend in question is rightly led, and thus whether the meeting should support the leading. This discernment is to be undertaken in the manner of Friends, that is, as a shared search for God's will until clarity has been reached. While no prescribed set of questions or approaches is fitting for all situations, the committee might consider discussing with the Friend queries such as the following:

- What is the nature of the leading?
- What gifts are necessary to follow the leading?
- Is this the right time for you to follow the leading?
- Are there aspects of the leading that you are still seeking to clarify, and for which the meeting can offer assistance?
- What challenges do you expect to face? How can the meeting help you handle those challenges?
- If the meeting provides you with formal recognition, will that help to advance the leading? How so?
- How will following the leading affect your spiritual journey? How might it deepen the spiritual life of the meeting community?
- How will following the leading affect your other responsibilities, including your responsibilities to the meeting?
- What kind of spiritual and practical support will you need in order to follow the leading? How much of that support do you expect the meeting to provide?

Once the clearness committee has completed its discernment process, it reports its findings to the monthly meeting, taking care to note any assistance that the led individual might need if the leading is to be taken under the meeting's care. This assistance involves spiritual nurturing and provisions for a travel companion if the leading involves travel. It might also include measures such as financial support, communication to bodies for which recognition of the leading may serve as a professional endorsement (see "Letters of Endorsement" below), and/or release of the Friend from responsibilities to the monthly meeting for some period of time.

The meeting as a body then decides whether to take the leading under its care. This discernment should involve not only the meeting's sense of whether the leading is a true one, but also the fit between the meeting's needs and resources and those of the led individual. This means that the meeting should query itself concerning its readiness to take the leading under its care, just as the clearness committee has queried the led Friend.

Anyone whose leading has been formally recognized is expected to confer regularly with a support committee selected by the meeting's care and counsel committee. The support committee acts on behalf of the meeting in helping the Friend stay grounded in the spirit as the leading continues to unfold. It is advisable for the led individual to offer a report on the leading to the meeting on at least an annual basis. This provides an opportunity for both the individual and the meeting to grow and deepen their spiritual lives.

Recording of Ministers

In addition to supporting leadings, Friends meetings sometimes choose to record ministers, although this practice has become less prevalent over time. Illinois Yearly Meeting has not made use of it since the early 20th century, but monthly meetings within ILYM are welcome to decide whether they are led to do so.

As with the recognition of leadings, the recording of ministers involves spiritual discernment of God's will on the part of the meeting community. Unlike recognition of leadings,

however, it is generally the meeting itself rather than the led Friend who initiates the proposal that a Friend be recorded as a minister. The recording of a minister is also generally intended to be enduring, unlike recognition of a leading, which may end after completion of a particular set of activities. This distinction is approximate, and will depend on the circumstances and on discernment by the meeting community.

The recording of a minister does not confer greater status or more privileges upon that Friend than on any other. On the contrary, it involves significant responsibility, for the recorded minister should expect to be held to a high standard.

[W]e do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to the work of the ministry, and therefore are fitted of the Lord for that purpose...and that . . . there is something more incumbent upon them in that respect than upon every common believer.

Robert Barclay, 1678

In undertaking discernment concerning the recording of ministers, monthly meetings may wish to consult sources other than this Faith and Practice, including books of faith and practice of other yearly meetings that record ministers. They may also wish to contact Friends from monthly meetings, particularly those meetings within ILYM that have already undertaken such discernment.

As with recognized leadings, recorded ministers should confer regularly, preferably in person, with a support committee appointed by their meeting, and should offer regular reports on their ministry. The meeting should recognize that it has the authority to lay down a ministry as well as to recognize one. All such decisions should be taken seriously and prayerfully.

Preparing for Discernment of Gifts and Leadings

It can be helpful for monthly meetings to prepare themselves for requests involving leadings and ministries. In part this involves simply being aware that such requests may occur, and that they may reflect God's will concerning various members of the meeting community. However, the meeting might also wish to consider how it might handle requests of this kind before they come about.

While general procedures for discernment concerning leadings are outlined in the "Recognition of Leadings" subsection above, those procedures might not be adequate for all meetings and all types of leadings. For that reason, meetings without formal processes regarding requests for recognition of leadings might wish to consider developing them. In so doing, the care and counsel committee should consider asking other ILYM meetings whether they have approved procedures on those matters that can be used as appropriate in developing their own.

If a meeting discerns that it is willing to record ministers, it might find it desirable to adopt formal procedures for initiating and terminating recognition of ministries. If so, those procedures should take into account the case of a Friend who transfers membership into the meeting after having been recorded as a minister in another Quaker meeting or church. The meeting will then be prepared for such situations if and when they arise. Again, the presence of such procedures is intended to enhance, rather than to exclude, discernment by the meeting community.

Travel Minutes, Letters of Endorsement, and Letters of Introduction

Under special circumstances which are often related to spiritual gifts and leadings, a monthly meeting may see fit to issue a letter to an individual Friend. The various types of letters are indicated and explained below.

Travel Minutes. If a recognized leading involves travel outside of one's home meeting, the monthly meeting must first approve of that travel. If it chooses to do so, a designated member of the meeting, usually the clerk, is expected to provide the led individual with a *travel minute*. A travel minute is a brief letter that indicates the meeting's approval of the leading and requests that hosting Friends offer loving care to the visitor.

It is customary for travel minutes to be read aloud in the meeting that is being visited, usually directly after Meeting for Worship or at the beginning of the Business Meeting or other event in which the visiting Friend participates. The clerk or representative of the visited meeting then endorses the travel minute, noting the date of the visit and offering a return greeting to the issuing meeting. Most endorsements also attest to the faithfulness of the traveling Friend. Travelers are expected to return their travel minute to their meeting when they return home.

Letters of Endorsement. A special case of leadings involves Friends who wish to serve in a professional capacity for which they need an endorsement from a recognized religious community (in addition to other credentials, usually those of a professional nature). This occurs most regularly in the case of pastoral counselors, chaplains, and others who provide psychological and theological guidance in settings such as hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, and residential care facilities, usually in an interfaith environment. In such cases, the monthly meeting's discernment with respect to the Friend's leading must take into account the type of endorsement that is required. The meeting's endorsement does not certify or imply professional qualification, but rather supports the Friend in undertaking service for which they require a religious endorsement in addition to any professional credentials. The meeting should be sensitive to any deadlines involved with respect to the role in question, treating the request in a manner that recognizes those deadlines while maintaining Quaker processes of discernment.

If the meeting elects to take under its care the leading of a Friend who wishes to serve in a professional capacity of this sort, it authorizes the issuing of a *letter of endorsement* to that Friend. That individual and the meeting should decide upon a mutual process for periodic reporting on the Friend's ministry (see "Recognition of Leadings" above). The meeting should be aware that re-endorsement may sometimes be necessary for certification purposes, depending on the requirements of the organization in which the Friend is serving.

Letters of Introduction. Friends or regular attenders who plan to visit another Friends meeting(s), whether as part of their travel plans or due to relocation to another area, are welcome to request a *letter of introduction* from the clerk of their monthly meeting even if they are not visiting the other meeting(s) on the basis of a recognized leading or recorded ministry. A letter of introduction identifies its bearer as a member of a meeting community, extends greetings from that community to the receiving meeting, and asks that hosting Friends cordially welcome the traveler. (See also Sojourning Members, Transfer of Membership, and Isolated Friends, xx-xx.)