

Reflections by the Committee on Worship and Ministry on some Common Questions Regarding Vocal Ministry.

Meeting for Worship is at the heart of the Quaker experience. As we sit with others in the silence, we wait attentively to experience the Spirit moving within and among us. Sometimes the whole period of worship may pass with no outward words being spoken. At other times one or more Friends may feel led to rise and deliver a message.

New attenders (and even longtime ones) may feel uncertain about such an open and unprogrammed service. As we offer these responses to some common questions, we want to stress that these are not rules but rather descriptions of the practices and attitudes that many Friends find helpful when they consider vocal ministry.

How do I speak in Meeting for Worship?

If it is comfortable to do so, most of us stand to speak, so that we may be heard easily. We try to speak loudly enough so that others may hear without straining.

Normally, we do not speak more than once during a meeting for worship. A message may be very brief or may last for several minutes. Even just one or two sentences may be very inspiring. We usually allow time between messages, so that all present may have some silence in which to digest what they have heard.

Usually, one speaker does not answer another. We are not engaged in a debate or even in a conversation. We are sharing our own insights, without trying to refute or support what others have said. (On the other hand, it often happens that one speaker's message inspires other messages on the same topic.)

Our messages generally come from our own experience. We are not trying to convince others or to display knowledge on a topic. We do not usually give personal or political announcements - unless the events we are announcing are connected to a spiritual insight or inspiration for us.

How do I know when I should speak?

Faith and Practice reminds us that we should come to meeting "resolved neither to speak or not to speak." We should be open to the possibility of speaking, if we are led, but we do not arrive in meeting with prepared remarks. Instead, we allow our messages to arise in the experience of that particular corporate worship.

On the other hand, many of us do engage in a regular "indirect" preparation for Meeting for Worship. We find that periods of prayer and reading and reflection throughout the week enrich our spiritual lives, enable us to move more deeply into the silence of worship and may also provide us with the material from which a message springs.

Sometimes as we sit in Worship, we may experience thoughts that seem to contain a particular insight. But how do we know if the thoughts that are arising in us constitute a message? We are often told that we should speak only when we are following a leading of the Spirit, and this is certainly our intention when we choose to deliver a message. However, we may find this advice intimidating or confusing if we assume that such a leading involves hearing voices or seeing visions or having some other dramatic spiritual experience.

While these experiences may happen to some, many of us find that the communications of the Spirit can come in a more subtle manner and that, with practice, we begin to discern more easily whether a message is meant to be shared with the other worshippers.

What do I need to consider when I am trying to discern whether a particular message is to be shared?

Generally, we do not give a message based on a thought that has just entered our mind. If the thought is important, it stays with us and we allow it to season in the silence. The thought may grow, or our perspective on it may shift. Sometimes it becomes deeper and more helpful to others, or we realize the thought is important but purely personal. Sometimes it just drops away.

We may conclude that our thought is worthy of becoming a message, but the moment is not right to share it. Perhaps there have already been many messages in meeting, and we sense the need for more silence; or perhaps the speakers in the meeting seem to have been reflecting on a common theme, and we believe that our message would interrupt the flow of thought. When we refrain from speaking in such cases, we often find that a version of our message will return to us at a later meeting when it is more appropriate.

Some, but not all Friends notice a particular quality that distinguishes a message from a mere collection of thoughts. We may feel a message as a thought that seizes us and will not let us go. Early Quakers spoke of physical sensations such as trembling when they needed to speak, and some Friends today still speak of an inward quaking or a pressure in the throat or an uneasiness in the stomach, when a message "wants to be delivered." When we leave meeting without delivering such a message, we often feel burdened, not released or incomplete.

If we have a message we are not sure of, we can share it at the end of meeting, when we introduce ourselves and share announcements, joys, concerns, and afterthoughts.

What if I don't receive any messages in Meeting for Worship? Am I not doing my share to participate?

It is important to remember that in Meeting for Worship we are all ministers. Our very presence as a responsible member of the community is a message. Some of us offer

vocal ministry, but all of us minister in our attention to the silence. As we nurture our spiritual lives and wait expectantly, the silence of worship becomes deeper and richer. All present are nourished whether or not vocal ministry occurs. We never need to feel responsible to create a message. We simply try to be open and willing to deliver a message that comes our way.

We, the members of the Committee on Worship and Ministry, hope you find the comments above helpful. Please feel free to speak to any of us about your questions or concerns on any aspect of Meeting for Worship.