

SILENCE, STILLNESS & WAITING: WORSHIP IN THE MANNER OF FRIENDS

I. INTRODUCTION

“(Worship) is the most obvious context in which, in Quaker practice, ‘doing nothing’ changes things” (Muers 2015, p.74).

Collective worship is an essential aspect of spirituality in most, if not all, religious traditions. The chosen form of worship can communicate quite a lot about the beliefs, values and assumptions of the group. So, what is distinctive about worship in the manner of Friends? What does it tell us about the nature of Quaker spirituality? Despite its apparent simplicity, is there more going on in Quaker worship than first meets the eye?

1. Meeting for Worship – Its Meaning

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”
(Matthew 18:20)

The word ‘worship’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon word meaning ‘worth-ship’, giving of worth to that which deserves it (Taber, 1992, p.3). Meeting for Worship is at the very centre of Quaker spirituality (Birkel 2004, p.39) and it is practiced in a way that distinguishes Friends quite clearly from other churches and religious groups. Protestant Christians tend to encounter God primarily through the words of the Bible and so worship is focused on the pulpit or lectern. On the other hand, the liturgical traditions, such as Catholicism and High Anglicanism, tend to approach religious experience through ritual and so worship is focused on the altar (Loring 1999, p.15). Douglas Gwyn asserts that corporate Quaker worship is ‘an attempt to meet at a place, beyond creeds and liturgical forms’ (Gwyn 2014, p.158). It is a practice of communal waiting and listening (Bill 2005, p.91). This reflects the priority that Friends give to the living spiritual presence of God that is available to all people. If we are to hear the ‘still small voice’ we need to be quiet and still. Friends practice expectant waiting in the hope of knowing God as a presence that is immediate and real (Abbott 2010, p.2). William Taber has suggested that for Quakers, worship is ‘holy communion in the manner of Friends’ (Taber 1992, p.3). This form of worship is the ground of Quaker spirituality and undergirds nearly everything that Quakers do, including marriage, funerals, and decision-making (Steere 1988, p.34). Although it might at first appear to be rather individualistic, worship in the manner of Friends is more than solitary prayer. It is like an orchestra with many individual players (Birkel 2004, p.44). God is the conductor, each of us are individual instruments and the gathered people are the orchestra (Bill 2005, p.91). Quakers believe that the whole of life is sacramental, since all occasions of life hold the potential of becoming a sacred means of God’s grace (Bill 2005, p.24). David Johns argues that Quakers have stripped worship down to the bone, reducing it to the fundamental simplicity of waiting together for the Spirit’s direction in a silence that reflects the silence of

heaven described in Revelation 8:1 (Angel & Dandelion 2013, p.262). This simplicity means that it can take place anywhere and at any time (Steere 1988, p.10). When describing worship, Taber uses the metaphor of an invisible stream of water into which we can step at any time (Taber 1992, p.4). Worship is not something we 'do' it is something we 'enter' by immersing ourselves in a living stream that is always present (Taber 1992, p.6).

2. How did the Quaker Form of Worship Develop?

In 17th-century England, groups of Seekers began meeting together in silence. This practice was prompted by a sense of despondency. Such people had explored and tried all the other religious options available at the time and found them wanting. This led them to conclude that the 'True Church' did not exist. In desperation, they decided to sit in silence to wait for a fresh revelation from God.

Although Quaker worship is rooted in the practice of the Seekers, its meaning became significantly different. Early Friends felt that they had experienced an inward Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit had been poured out on them, prompting the proclamation that "Christ is come to teach his people himself!" They were seekers who had found. Since they now knew by experience that God was an active and powerful spiritual presence within them and around them, worshipping in silence became a practice of setting aside all human thoughts and action in order that God's still small voice might be heard, a voice that would teach and transform them. This was 'expectant waiting' and the dictionary definition of 'expectant' describes this well:

Expectant - having or showing an excited feeling that something is about to happen, especially something good.

In worship Friends waited in excited anticipation for God through the Spirit to teach and transform them.

3. Meeting for Worship – Its Purpose

"At its best and truest, however, worship seems to me to be direct, vital, joyous, personal experience and practice of the presence of God"
Rufus Jones (Birkel 2004, p.123).

Quaker waiting worship is an act of corporate listening to God, a form of group contemplative prayer in which people become aware of the 'still small voice' of God (Wilson 1996, p.). Quaker waiting worship is meant to be led by God rather than any human authority (Loring 1999, p.17). The practice is therefore an attempt to eliminate everything that might distract us from devoting all our attention to waiting for and listening to the voice of God (Wilson 1996, p.34). The aim is for worshipers to experience an increased awareness of God's presence (Birkel 2004, p. 43) so that worship becomes a time of sensitising to the movement of God in the heart, of

being acquainted with the promptings of love and truth (Loring 1999, p.21). Douglas Steere has suggested that meeting for worship is a laboratory of the Holy Spirit (Steere 1988, p.12). The quality of our lives as a spiritual community depends upon the degree to which we are inwardly reached by the Spirit so that our personal and corporate lives move toward a deeper sense of unity with God (Loring 1999, p.30). John Punshon notes that the ultimate purpose of worship is to be transformed, to be conformed individually and collectively to the image of God (Punshon 1987, p.90). Rachel Muers argues that unprogrammed worship offers a space that enables people to break away from patterns of thought and behaviour that prevent them from seeing, expressing or responding to the truth (Muers 2015, p.79). It also teaches us the value of patience, restraining the desire to try and fix a problem too quickly, which is usually an attempt to rid us of anything that we find troubling (Muers 2015, p.78).

4. The Nature of Silence and Stillness

Quakers regard silence as a pathway to God, offering the possibility of a profound spiritual encounter for anyone who is seeking a fresh way to connect with the eternal (Bill 2005, p.5). If we want to hear the divine voice speaking clearly within us, we need to be still, to be silent in the centre of our souls (Bill 2005, p.71). Stilling the body and mind is essential if we are to 'stand still in the Light' (Abbott 2010, p.151). In this sense, silence is a preparation for being still. It is a means of worship, not the worship itself (Punshon 1987, p.12). It is a participatory act in which we engage our heart, mind, soul and body in listening for the voice of God (Bill 2005, p.9). William Penn felt that silence enabled people to encounter God in a living and vital 'holy hush' (Bill 2005, p.21). At its best, Quaker silence is not merely the absence of noise but is filled with expectation that God will speak and that when we hear God our lives will be changed (Bill 2005, p.32). Friends have found in their experience over the years that in the stillness people become aware of messages coming from the senses that are normally obscured by distracted busyness (Punshon 1987, p.23). John Punshon notes that when Quakers practice stillness together as a community there is a great release of God's power into their worship and their lives (Punshon 1987, p.9).

5. The Individual's Role and Responsibility

Although Quaker worship is primarily a corporate experience, individual members of the community must play their part in deepening the spiritual life of the meeting. Each worshiper brings an amount of silence nurtured through daily practice so that when the community is assembled together this creates a larger silence (Wilson 1996, p.35). 'Centering down' can be done far more effectively if one has come to worship with heart and mind prepared (Punshon 1987, p.62). Within the worship, Friends may experience inwardly what members of other churches and faith groups experience outwardly. In this sense, the basic elements of worship are: centering

(settling down, quietening down, becoming still), welcoming (entering into the shared experience of the worshiping group), deep worship (going to a place of greater stillness and openness), communion (the experience of the Spirit of God working among the gathered people and bringing them into unity) and sending (as the worship comes to an end, preparing to re-enter the normal activities of life). This shows that within silent worship a lot is going on, even if it cannot be seen (Bill 2005, p.106).

6. The Gathered Meeting

Sometimes within Quaker worship, those involved sense that the meeting is experiencing a particularly deep level of communion. The 'gathered' or 'covered' meeting is a stage in worship where the whole group feels powerfully knit together. Thomas Kelly wrote that in these circumstances "an electric hush, solemnity and depth of power steels over the worshipers" (Birkel 2004, p.46). Patricia Loring explains that in the gathered meeting worshipers experience a profound interior and mystical experience of communion with one another and with God in love (Loring 1999, p.30). In such circumstances, one's normal awareness of time and place may be transcended. Punshon has suggested that one of the best ways to assess whether a meeting has been truly gathered is the reluctance on the part of the worshipers to end it (Punshon 1987, p.88).

7. Vocal Ministry

"Speak only if you can improve the silence" - Canby-Jones (Bill 2005, p.97).

Quaker worship and ministry is prophetic in nature. This involves deep listening to God and a willingness to be a vessel through which God speaks and acts (Gwyn 2014, p.21). Within a meeting for worship, every individual has the opportunity to speak in vocal ministry if they feel led to do so. Vocal ministry is directed to the gathered body to deepen their worshiping experience (Birkel 2004, p.47). Its purpose is to take the hearers beyond human utterance into the life and power of God (Birkel 2004, p.54). In this sense the function of ministry is the spiritual formation of Friends, not their instruction. Therefore Friends should try to listen with their hearts rather than with their minds (Punshon 1987, p.74). Punshon has argued that for early Friends, vocal ministry was a flute for the Holy Spirit to play on. The individual is to be passive so that God might speak through them (Punshon 1987, p.78). Such freedom to speak within worship demands careful individual discernment of the leading to vocal ministry (Birkel 2004, p.49). The individual must test whether the message comes from God or from the self and whether it is meant for the whole community or just themselves. Friends have long recognised the importance of not 'outrunning the guide' (i.e. not allowing the self to get carried away by losing touch with divine guidance) in vocal ministry (Birkel 2004, p.50). In addition, Taber has noted the importance of the 'ministry of silence' which is open to everyone within the meeting (Taber 1992, p.24). He suggests that 'this invisible

ministry helps the meeting reach that state of consciousness in which minds and hearts and wills are opened and united so that the work of God may go on among us' (Taber 1992, p.25). Everyone can discover how to silently and wordlessly hold the entire meeting up before God, into the healing Light (Taber 1992, p.25).

8. The Role of Eldership

All worshipers share a responsibility for the spiritual life of the meeting and for the depth and quality of worship and vocal ministry. However, a number of Friends accept a specific obligation in this area. Elders have particular responsibility for ensuring the right ordering of worship, the quality of vocal ministry and the nurturing of the spiritual life of the meeting (Birkel 2004, p.99). This focus on the right ordering of worship includes meetings for marriage, funerals and business.

9. The Consequences of Worship

Gwyn has noted that the aim of Quaker worship is that our words and lives speak divine truth and love. 'We place out gifts, insights and worth at the disposal of a group which in turn places itself at the disposal of divine, imponderable purposes in the world' (Gwyn 2014, p.24 & 24). Part of the expectancy of Quaker worship is the expectation that Friends will be changed by the experience. Taber notes that Friends are called to transform the grace of a gathered meeting into the grace of a transformed life (Taber 1992, p.27). He suggested that, after worship, Friends need to ask themselves two key questions. What new insights do I come away with? Do I now have the resolve to act faithfully? The handshake at the end of worship might be regarded as sealing the commitment to faithfulness (Taber 1992, p.28). We might expect to come away from meeting for worship with:

- An enhanced conception of the spiritual order of things.
- A heightened sensitivity to the injustice and violence around us.
- A sense of empowerment to help heal lives and change society (Taber 1992, pp.16-27).

II. HEARTS AND MINDS PREPARED: INDIVIDUAL SPIRITUALITY AND PRACTICE

We have previously noted the centrality of the corporate meeting for worship within the Quaker way, but what significance does individual spiritual practice play? How important is a regular spiritual discipline for Friends and for Quaker community, and what types of practice have been characteristic of Quaker spirituality over the years? Is there anything distinctive about Quaker practices, or do they simply replicate the spiritual disciplines that have been used within the Christian church and in other traditions throughout the past two thousand years?

1. The Purpose of Practice

The fullest Quaker life is one lived in attentive listening for the murmurings of the 'still small voice' (1 Kings 19:13) in all the dimensions of our lives (Loring 1999, p.70). Therefore, our individual spiritual practice should facilitate a sense of the presence of God who is always present with us, whether we are aware of it or not (Loring 1997, p.50). In this sense, practice is all about cultivating a relationship that will last and deepen for many years (Loring 1997, p.11). This represents a commitment to giving priority to what really deserves our attention (Muers 2015, p.77). John Punshon has argued that those who have a proper period of contemplation or prayer every day are able to enter more deeply into weekly communal Quaker worship (Punshon 1987, p.). In the silence, our spiritual practice, whether on our own or in community, allows the Light to reveal the dark things within us and liberate us from them so that they no longer have power over us (Abbott 2010, p.141). If we are serious about seeking transformation, then our practice needs to be a daily discipline rather than merely a once-a-week interlude. Above all, we need to remember that we are always already in the divine presence (Gwyn 2014, p.27).

2. To Be Broken and Tender

Quaker spirituality assumes that there is a barrier between humans and God that needs to be removed (Wilson 1996, p34). The aim of our spiritual practice is to make the soul as receptive as it can be to God's work within it (Birkel 2004, p.79). Margery Abbott has noted the traditional Quaker words used to describe this process are 'to be broken and tender'. We need to be broken open so that the Spirit can enter and be tendered (i.e. sensitised) to the message of this Spirit within our consciences (Abbott 2010, p.166). This means allowing God to break up the hard soil of our lives to make room for the holy seed to grow (Abbott 2010, p.61). Our defences must be broken down if the Spirit is to bring us to new life (Abbott 2010, p.26). We must strive to remove all the things that stand in the way of the fullest communion with God (Punshon 1987, p.18) and this requires us to become vulnerable and give up our own pretensions to being in control (Abbott 2010, p.12). Adopting a discipline of detachment can help us to sever the bonds that prevent our souls from being open to God (Punshon 1987, p.44).

3. Times of Retirement

Two of the most significant barriers standing between us and an intimate on-going experience of and sensitivity to the Spirit are busyness and distractedness. It is therefore important to set aside what Friends have traditionally called 'times of retirement' for openness to the Spirit (Birkel 2004, p.76). These are times in which we remove ourselves from all outward concerns and activities in order to attend exclusively to the presence and work of the divine within us (Loring 1997, p.8). Abbott has argued that times of 'retirement' from the world can help prepare our battered souls to be tender to the Spirit when we re-enter it (Abbott 2010, p.138).

This discipline may well require us to make lifestyle changes to enable greater openness to God's guidance. This might include working less and simplifying our lives (Loring 1997, pp.124-130). William Taber reassures us that, even in a very busy life, opportunities for spiritual practice, however brief, can present themselves just before we sleep, just as we wake up and on the journey to work. Eventually, the practice of dipping in and out of the living stream of the Spirit becomes an essential part of each day (Taber 1992, pp.7-8). Taber has also noted that, traditionally, some Friends have felt a calling to special time of 'retirement' before the weekly meeting for worship to help prepare for the gathering (Taber 1992, p.12).

4. Practicing Silence and Stillness

The discipline of stillness of body and mind opens the being to the fullness of the Light (Abbott 2010, p.148). Spiritual silence helps us stop and sense God, the creator present in everyday life (Bill 2005, p.31), but it takes effort and intentionality. We all need to learn the language of silence, the ability to listen deeply (Bill 2005, pp.37-38). Practicing self-discipline is a process of developing another dimension of our sensory perception, an inner awareness (Abbott 2010, p.158). Abbott has noted that the word 'attending' means both paying attention and being present (Abbott 2010, p.6). This is what is required in individual practice and corporate worship; we must be present and we must pay attention.

5. Prayer and Ceaseless Prayer

In prayer, we open ourselves to God and invite the unexpected, risk being changed or confronted with the necessity of change (Loring 1997, p.68). Quakers have tended to give priority to a prayer of inward silence which is separated from the operations of the imagination, bringing ourselves into the presence of the divine (Birkel 2004, p.78). This type of prayer prioritises waiting, attending on, listening to and opening ourselves to God (Loring 1997, p.48), a discipline of emptying the head and stilling the mind so that the whole body can listen for the whispers of the creation in our inner ear (Abbott 2010, p.145). There are no fixed patterns for this, however, and Patricia Loring has noted that prayer is as personalised and individualised as any conversation between two unique individuals (Loring 1997, p.47). Twentieth-century American Quaker Thomas Kelly developed a focus on ceaseless prayer as opposed to specific focused times of prayer, a practice of moving beyond all words and images (Birkel 2004, pp.80/81). This is an approach that has great resonance for many Friends. It is a prayer of the heart which aims to carry prayer more deeply with us, almost as part of our physical being. This is the ceaseless prayer that the apostle Paul refers to in chapter five, verse 17 of his first letter to the Thessalonians (Loring 1997, p.78). It shares similarities with the use of the Jesus Prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

6. The Use of Writings

Although the Quaker way was not founded on the absolute authority of a sacred text and has given priority instead to the direct inward experience of the divine Spirit, the use of writings in individual spiritual practice is extremely important and well-established. Patricia Loring has argued that devotional reading is intended to feed our hearts, supporting and guiding our turning to God inwardly in meditation and prayer (Loring 1997, p.13). Within the Quaker tradition we can see this in particular in the use of the Bible, pastoral epistles, spiritual journals and advices and queries:

- **The Bible** – Quakers have tended to use the Bible less as rule book or book of doctrine and more as a window onto the inward spiritual life. This has led to what Michael Birkel describes as a meditative reading of scripture, illuminated by the Spirit (Birkel 2004, p.87). The Bible is useful because it is the product of the divine Spirit worked through people in the past, a Spirit that is still working through people in the present. It also offers outward narratives that describe inward spiritual experiences (e.g. the Exodus story in the Hebrew scriptures can be read as an inward spiritual process or experience).
- **Pastoral Epistles** – Pastoral epistles have been extremely important throughout Quaker history, as they were within the early Church (Birkel 2004, p.83). George Fox and other early Friends wrote hundreds of such letters as the movement established itself in the 17th century. They covered a wide range of topics, including encouragement, admonishment and spiritual guidance. Since Quakerism has always been based more on a practice and a way than on a commonly-agreed set of doctrines, the pastoral epistle represents a fruitful way to build-up and support individuals and communities.
- **Spiritual Journals** – Quakers have a long and well-established tradition of using journals to record and share spiritual experiences with others (Birkel 2004, p.89). Journaling is both a way of recording our responses to spiritual experience and a way of discursive meditation itself (Loring 1997, p.38). Quaker journals provide accounts of the presence and work of God through the vicissitudes of a life time (Loring 1997, p.40). Again, because the emphasis is on experience rather than on systems of thought, the journal acts an appropriate tool for communicating the Quaker way.
- **Advices and Queries** – Although advices and queries were originally used by yearly meetings mainly to collect information from individual meetings, over time they have increasingly been used devotionally offering the individual Friend an opportunity to experience challenge, discomfort and insight (Birkel 2004, p.100). In this sense, Douglas Steere has suggested the Quaker use of queries represents an example of ‘examination of conscience’ for both the individual and the gathered community (Steere 1988, p.19).

7. Experience and the Need for Patience

The fruits of individual spiritual practice may not be immediately obvious and may take many years to reveal themselves. This can be a challenge for people, particularly within a culture dominated by the value of instant gratification. There is therefore a great need for patience in the spiritual life. We have to accept that it will come to fruition in its proper time (Abbott 2010, p.60). There is also a danger in expecting our spiritual experiences to be dramatic and life-changing. Margery Abbot has noted that the urgings of the Spirit can be so simple we may overlook them (Abbott 2010, p.159). Our experience of God's guidance is likely to be felt like a 'gentle nudging'. That said, we should not rule out the possibility that it might also be a consuming fire (Abbott 2010, p.11). William Taber offers the following guidance about individual spiritual practice (Taber 1992, pp.8-9):

1. Choose a regular practice recommended by an authority you trust and persist with it even if results are hard to discern.
2. Don't be afraid to use words and vocal prayer as part of your practice.
3. Cultivate the capacity to notice and appreciate beauty and a sense of wonder.
4. Find one or more spiritual friends with whom to share the journey.

III. A GATHERED PEOPLE: CORPORATE DISCERNMENT AND DECISION-MAKING

Michael Birkel tells us that discernment, as an important spiritual discipline, emerged within the Christian monastic traditions through the writings of John Cassian, Benedict of Nursia and others. In the 16th century, Ignatius of Loyola offered rules for discernment in his 'Spiritual Exercises'. These included the examination of inner motivations to determine the will of God in making decisions. The task of discernment is to distinguish between 'true' and 'false' spirits or motivations (Angel & Dandelion 2013, p.246). Discernment is so significant for Friends because the Quaker way has tended to give priority to the immediate presence of God in spirit over the doctrines of an institutional church or the writings of a sacred text. Any community that emphasises the present availability of divine guidance must take discernment seriously (Birkel 2004, p.55). How can the true leadings of the spirit be distinguished from the illusions of the human mind or the belief systems of human culture? This is particularly important for Friends when they come together to make decisions about who they are, how they should live and what action they should take in the world. What do Friends mean by discernment and how does this shape Quaker business method?

1. Discernment and Leadings

Discernment is the ability to distinguish or separate things out (Punshon 1987, p.77). Practices of discernment are important in distinguishing impulses and feelings from the guidance of the inward Light (Abbott 2010, p.58). It is a practice of listening which is at the heart of Quaker spirituality. In discerning our leadings (how we feel the Spirit is leading us to act) we must always seek to determine what is of the Spirit and what is not (Loring 1999, p.67)? The practice of discernment is not an optional activity or a purely individual discipline, it requires ongoing vigilance and is done within community (Birkel 2004, p.63). Leadings always come to the individual but the group has a crucial role in discerning whether they are genuine (Birkel 2004, p.55). Discernment is a continuous process because it looks for the specific guidance of God in particulars, rather than for generalised moral obligations (Loring 1999, p.99). This also means that Friends may need to be prepared to relinquish long-term plans and planning in favour of waiting on the unexpected new things that God wants us to bring forth among and through us (Loring 1999, p.209). Birkel notes that some discernment looks forward and asks where a leading might take an individual or group. Some discernment looks back and asks where is motivation is coming from (Angel & Dandelion 2013, p.254).

2. The Tests

“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

In practicing the discernment of leadings, a gathered community must first determine the tests that will be applied. These might be the fruits of the Spirit that the apostle Paul lists in his letter to the Galatians (Loring 1999, p.75). For early Friends a key test of any leading was whether it was in harmony with God's revelation in the scriptures and in the early church (Wilson 1996, p.186). Although Quaker discernment is spirit-led, it is not undertaken in a completely unstructured and spontaneous way. Michael Birkel has suggested that Quakers have traditionally applied four discernment tests:

- **The integrity of the individual** - can the community trust the testimony of the individual?
- **Patience** - is there a willingness to take the time necessary to test the leading thoroughly?
- **Consistency of the Holy Spirit** - is the leading consistent with the outcome of previous discernment over time?
- **Coming into unity** - is the Spirit bringing the community into unity about the matter? (Birkel 2004, p.56).

Birkel also notes that across history, various strands of Quakerism have emphasised different foundation for discernment. For example, in the 19th century Hicksite

Friends focused on the use of human reason, Wilburite Friends on the need for watchfulness and subduing 'creatureliness' and Gurneyite Friends on the authority of the Scripture. In 20th century, Liberal Friends increasingly focused on the authority of individual experience (pp.252-253).

3. Individual Responsibility

The practice of Quaker discernment and decision-making requires members of the community to exercise humility, patience and gentleness (Loring 1999, p.157). Traditionally, Friends have recognised the need for interior vigilance and a sharp awareness of the possibility of self-deception (Angel & Dandelion 2013, p.247). Each individual is expected to seek to help the whole meeting listen, hear and be faithful to the divine will rather than persuade it to adopt a personal preferred plan of action. This might be done in silent prayer as well as by vocal ministry (Wilson 1996, p.138). In her letter of spiritual counsel, Margaret Fell emphasised the importance of interior listening and self-watchfulness. This is reflected in her persistent use of words such as 'wait', 'see', 'mind', and 'keep low' (Angel & Dandelion 2013, pp.247-8). Corporate discernment and decision-making requires a great deal of trust on the part of all involved. For example, the community needs to be assured that everyone is operating with integrity (Wilson 1996, p.143)? Everyone is called to give over their own will/ego and commit themselves to listening to the movement of the Spirit in all things (Loring 1999, p.284).

4. Spiritual Gifts

A key dimension of corporate discernment is the identification of the spiritual gifts of each member of the group. The community has a significant role in discerning, naming and nurturing the spiritual gifts of its members (Wilson 1996, pp.91-92). It also has a valuable role in discerning opportunities for the individual to exercise their gifts (Wilson 1996, p.108). This is a responsibility of all but is exercised in particular by elders and members of nominations committees. One example of this discernment is the recognition of the 'weighty Friend' as one whose guidance and opinion has weight due to their spiritual maturity and sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit (Wilson 1996, p.138).

5. The Business Meeting

Friend's way of making decisions and conducting business is a unique and distinctive feature of the Quaker way. The meeting for business represents a corporate effort to turn over governance of ourselves to God at a variety of levels (Loring 1999, p.155). In particular, it demonstrates the Quaker belief in continuing revelation that is always open to fresh disclosures (Steere 1988, p.34). John Punshon has argued that business meetings have a premier place in schooling us in listening to God and that they are the basis of our ministry and our common life and are where the source of our unity is to be found (Punshon 1987, p.99). At its best the meeting for

business is a disciplined exercise in corporate discernment in particular matters of personal conduct, relationships and outward work (Loring 1999, p.85). It is a discipline that cannot be rushed and so it may be necessary for us to commit more time to less business so that it can truly be addressed in a worshipful way (Loring 1999, p.186). In seeking to finding unity together, everyone needs to commit to act as one body, to be open to the Spirit's leading, to take responsibility for testing the leading to speak, and to recognise the need for leadership based on the discernment of gifts (Gwyn 2014, p.79).

Here are a number of important aspects of the Quaker manner of conducting business and making decisions:

- **The Role of Clerk** - The Clerk is the servant of the meeting, not merely a scribe but a discerner, a listener to how the Spirit is moving among the group (Loring 1999, p.89). The Clerk's primary duty is to listen and discern the 'sense of the meeting' and attempt to reflect this by drafting a minute (Birkel 2004, p.70). The Clerk holds a space open to enable God to guide the gathered people in their discernment (Abbott 2010, p.185).
- **The Sense of the Meeting** – The term 'the sense of the meeting' refers to where the gathered meeting has got to in its corporate discernment. It points to an intuitive sense of the inner dimension of the issue or situation being considered (Loring 1999, p.86).
- **The Purpose of Minutes** – In drafting a minute, the Clerk is seeking to reflect 'the sense of the meeting'. The minute is an attempt to express the will of God for the meeting in the particular matter at hand at the time (Loring 1999, p.87). Because they describe the current position of the discerning group, minutes are prepared and agreed in the business meeting and not after it.
- **The Importance of Unity** - In corporate discernment the expectation is that the community will come into unity when facing decisions so voting is not used (Birkel 2004, p.67). It is a general Quaker understanding that no decision will be taken until Friends feel united in it (Loring 1999, p.163). Douglas Steere has reflected this commitment in the phrase "When in doubt, wait" (Steere 1988, p.43). In a Quaker business meeting the task is not to find a decision on which all approve, but the decision which is in unity with the Holy Spirit (Wilson 1996, p.133). Friends are willing to sacrifice 'efficiency' in decision-making to the principle that the minority might be right (Punshon 1987, p.98). Because Friends value unity so highly, in conducting business there is a need to exercise patience and waiting (Birkel 2004, p.68). Unity will only be achieved by being sensitive to the leadings of the Spirit it cannot be forced (Birkel 2004, p.71).

6. Quaker Business Structures

Early Friends developed practices and structures that attempted to ensure good order and corporate responsibility without re-establishing human institutions and authority. These ways are tried and tested and have endured. Doug Gwyn has noted how Quaker decision-making reflects the New Testament example, and, in particular, the process described in Acts 15 (Gwyn 2014, p.79). Patricia Loring explains that Quaker discernment and decision-making processes seek to ensure that the gathered community is ordered in a way that makes it responsive to divine promptings (Loring 1999, p.201). Unusually, Quaker organisational structures resemble an inverted pyramid rather than the normal hierarchical pyramid. It is a generally accepted principle that no business should appear before a more inclusive body unless those bodies included in it have united in the discernment of its rightness (Loring 1999, p.199). Quaker discernment and authority gains weight as it involves more of its members (Loring 1999, p.205). For example, all members are entitled to participate at all levels of business discernment from the local meeting up to the yearly meeting.

7. Two Specific Aspect of Quaker Discernment

There are many dimensions to Quaker discernment and decision-making practice. Here are two important examples:

- **Threshing Meetings** – The threshing meeting contributes to the overall corporate discernment process by providing an opportunity for all those involved to express their views openly and freely (and sometimes noisily) as a preparation to the quieter and more worshipful approach taken in the normal business meeting. This ensures that nothing important remains hidden or unspoken in the process.
- **The Clearness Process** - Clearness committees are a method Friends have used to assist individuals in discerning leadings in many areas of their lives (Birkel 2004, p.73). Clearness committees are used in purely personal matters and also for preliminary testing by a small group before a leading is brought to the meeting for business (Loring 1999, p.97).

IV. SILENCE AND WITNESS: THE SPIRITUALITY OF QUAKER TESTIMONY

1. The Contemplative and the Activist

“True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to men it.” (William Penn)

Michael Birkel’s book on Quaker spirituality is entitled *Silence and Witness* because the Quaker way has always sought to integrate a contemplative practice with social action (Birkel 2004, p.144). This is a faith that is strongly inward and yet immediately

evident in behaviour and words (Abbott 2010, p.43). It is one that recognises quite explicitly that the inward realm and the outward world are one (Punshon 1987, p.131). As we might expect, meeting for worship is at the heart of this dimension of the Quaker way. Brent Bill explains that in the shared silence of worship Friends find the strength to live well in the world. There is no such thing as a Quaker hermit (Bill 2005, p.103). He argues that the holy silence calls us to our better selves, to live lives of justice, kindness and humility and to walk with God (Bill 2005, p.49). The Spirit of God leads people to concrete action in the world and to give priority to the lived faith over complicated matters of belief. Lucretia Mott asserted that Quakers are to imitate the deeds of Christ rather than argue about our notions about him (Birkel 2004, p.136). The universal faith exists in a way of life rather than a set of beliefs (Punshon 1987, p.128).

2. An Outward Sign of Inward Change

“We need to use our testimonies as guides to another world than this one, here and now.” (Jonathan Dale)

Lloyd Lee Wilson explains that Quaker testimonies are not valuable in and of themselves. Rather they are naturally occurring outward signs that a fundamental change has taken place within the individual (Wilson 1996, p.163). In this sense, testimonies witness to the wider world the power of God to transform both individuals and human society (Birkel 2004, p.104). Patricia Loring has argued that the spiritual force of a testimony comes from the experience of the Spirit to which it testifies. It comes from an experience of God breaking into the particularities of our lives, disquieting our hearts so that they will not be stilled until we respond (Loring 1999, p.112). This shows why Quaker testimony is fundamentally a spiritual phenomenon rather than a secular political position. Friends have found that the Quaker quest for peace and justice is best grounded in an inward transformation from fear and greed to love of neighbour (Birkel 2004, p.144). It might be argued that Quakers practice a form of life-style evangelism insofar as the visible nature of one’s transformed life turns other people to the transformative Spirit that is within them (Abbott 2010, p.47). This was what George Fox meant when he encouraged Friends to “be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.” John Punshon asserts that a testimony is a declaration of truth or fact, communicating what God has done in our lives. It is therefore both prophetic and evangelical (Punshon 1987, p.45). It is prophetic in that it communicates something about the nature of God and God’s vision for the world. It is evangelical in the sense that the quality of the visible lives of Friends should encourage others to consider the Quaker way.

V. RACHEL MUERS ON QUAKER TESTIMONY

1. Negative Testimony – Interruption and Refusal

For a community with a long-standing commitment to peace and reconciliation, it can seem incongruous that Quaker testimony has often been adversarial, confrontational and negative (p.54). The negative nature of testimony is about a sustained enacted opposition to some power or structure of thought that claims to shape and uphold the world but in fact destroys it (p.58). Testimony is therefore a collective, learned and storied process of ‘doing the truth’ and opposing lies that systematically conceal, suppress or silence the complex reality of the world-before-God (p.63). Because of this testimony has often taken the form of a double negative – a denial of a lie (p.21). Two examples of this:

- **Sexuality** - the 1960s publication *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* was a piece of negative testimony aimed at denying the lies being told in the society of the time about what was and what was not ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ human expressions of sexuality (p.168)
- **Sustainability** – Proclaiming that, when humans assume that they own and are sovereign over the non-human creation, this is a systematically enacted falsehood that needs to be challenged (p.183).

Testimony can be understood as a form of repentance. It is an action of interruption, denial or refusal, rejecting current circumstances without yet knowing what the alternative might look like (p.65). This reflects a reticence about how knowledgeable we really are. It assumes that, although we can know and understand evil within the world, we cannot fully know or understand God. This leads us to a negative form of testimony and what Muers calls an apophatic theology (p.59). In kataphatic spirituality or ‘via positiva’ God is described in positive terms (i.e. God is this or that). In apophatic spirituality or ‘via negativa’ God as mystery is defined negatively (i.e. God is not this or that).

2. Positive Testimony – Opening Up New Possibilities

Negative testimony leads to positive testimony. Muers suggests that sustained negative practices of refusal give rise to new positive forms of practice. These might be called ‘holy experiments’ (p.81). We deny or refuse what we know in order to do something that is not yet fully known. Such denial or refusal interrupts established patterns and assumptions and makes space for alternative possibilities (p.59). In this sense testimony is future-oriented and open-ended. A testimony ‘against’ something leads to actions that express the hope for positive change (p.85). For example *A Quaker View of Sex* challenged powerful assumptions about what was ‘natural’ and healthy that wielded power over people’s lives and bodies. This created space for the development of alternatives (pp.165/6).

3. Communication – Winning by persuasion

Testimony acts as nonviolent, self-involving communication that ‘wins’ by persuasion rather than coercion. It offers itself freely to be interpreted and misinterpreted by those who see and hear it (p.103). So testimony is fully incorporated into daily life. This is a life that ‘speaks’; it is speech, but it is speech that ‘lives’ fully embedded in a particular context (p.99).

4. Provoking – Prompting a response

Testimony presents itself to the world and calls forth a response from those who hear it and see it (p.99). It relies on the response of others for its interpretation and reception, much like vocal ministry (p.104). Again, this reflects a focus on ‘entreaty’ rather than ‘contention’.

5. Inherently Risky and Uncertain

Because it relies on the response of others for its interpretation and reception, testimony is inherently risky and uncertain. For example, James Nayler’s story reveals the ambiguous and risky character of testimony. This includes the possibility of being misunderstood, rejected, suffering and dying or being found to have been wrong (p.146). In addition, we might expect good testimony to look odd and threatening and we might not expect its impact to be immediately apparent (p.190)