

Learning Resources 3.1

Early Quaker Worship: Contemplative, Charismatic, and Prophetic

Worship in the earliest Quaker movement seems to have combined a contemplative practice of waiting in silence and stillness with a strongly charismatic and embodied response that included physical shaking and spirit-led prophetic utterance. This is reflected in the following words from the early Quaker leader, Edward Burrough (1634-1663):

While waiting upon the Lord in silence, as often we did for many hours together, with our minds and hearts toward him, being stayed in the light of Christ within us from all thoughts, fleshly motions and desires, we received often the pouring down of the spirit upon us, and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosened, and our mouths opened, and we spake with new tongues, as the Lord gave us utterance, and his spirit led us, which was poured upon sons and daughters.¹

Edward Burrough (1659)

Such an approach to worship appears to reflect the apostle Paul's description of ordered worship within the early Christian Church:

When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three and each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If someone sitting receives a revelation, let the first person be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged...

1 Corinthians 14:26-31 (NRSV)

More Information About Early Quaker Worship

Videos:

No outward forms

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/michael-birkel-form-without-substance/>

Shaking hands

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/handshake/>

Books:

Michael L. Birkel. *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004).

Pink Dandelion. *The Liturgies of Quakerism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

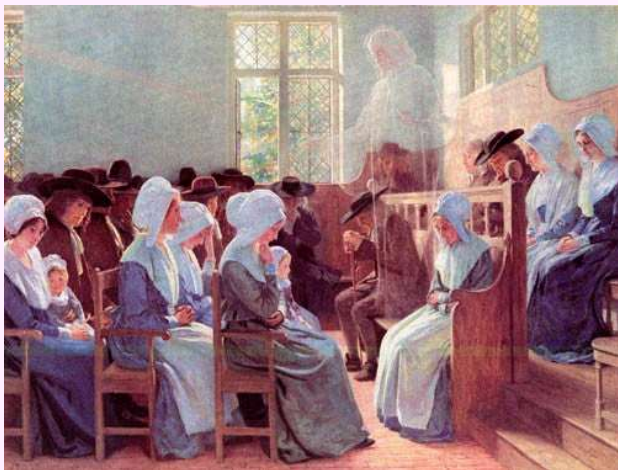
You might like to spend some quiet time meditating on the words of Edward Burrough and the apostle Paul, paying close attention to your responses as they arise within you.

¹ Edward Burrough, "Epistle to the Reader" in George Fox. *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*, 1659. Quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith and Practice*, 19.20.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you respond to this style of worship? What is your own experience of worship and what have you found most helpful in nurturing an awareness of the presence of God?
2. In what ways does the early Quaker worship style combine elements reflecting Orthodox and Catholic spirituality and Reformed Protestant practice? What might this tell us about early Quakerism?
3. Why do you think that Friends have found it hard to maintain a balance between the contemplative and charismatic aspects of early Quaker worship?
4. What emotions and fresh insights have you experienced as a result of thinking deeply about the nature of early Quaker worship?

Some Images of early Quaker worship.



Learning Resources 3.2

Unprogrammed Quaker 'Waiting' Worship

Traditional unprogrammed Quaker 'waiting' worship involves the whole community adopting a listening, hearing and obeying relationship with God without the need for physical mediators. Friends have found that this practice can result in a powerful sense of the divine presence in and amongst the gathered people (sometimes called the 'gathered meeting' or the 'covered meeting'). This is described in the following passage:

In our assemblies the Holy Spirit speaks directly to the human soul, and worship is a personal communion with God and a yielding of our wills to the Divine will, for which no form or aid of clergy is necessary. This communion may be realized in a true and vital way though there be no vocal service. A living silence may be so filled with the Divine Presence that all who worship become conscious of it and are drawn together in unity under the power of His love.²

Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative) – Book of Discipline

Within Liberal and Pluralist Quaker communities, this form of worship can also lead to similar experiences, even if the beliefs of the gathered people diverge significantly, both from traditional Quaker Christianity and from one another.

Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us.

Advices & Queries 8 (Britain Yearly Meeting)

In one sense, unprogrammed Quaker worship takes the simplifying tendency of the Reformation to its logical conclusion by removing all outward imagery and liturgy. However, it can also be understood as an internal and spiritualised version of "high church" liturgical worship.

In some ways, Friends' understanding with respect to worship is closer to the "high church" liturgical traditions than the "low church" traditions of most Protestants. The highly liturgical traditions seek to center their worship on the Presence of Christ, though they often associate the Presence with the elements of their communion or Eucharist.³

Traditional Quaker Christianity

More Information About Unprogrammed Quaker Worship

Videos:

What to expect in a Meeting for Worship

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/what-to-expect-quaker-meeting-worship/>

² Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative). *The Book of Discipline* (Barnesville, OH: Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative, 2001), 7.

³ Arthur Berk, et al. *Traditional Quaker Christianity* (Barnesville, OH: Ohio Yearly Meeting, 2014), 81.

How to deepen Quaker Meeting for Worship

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/how-to-deepen-quaker-meeting-worship/>

Books:

George H. Gorman. *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship* (London: Quaker Books, 1973).

Taber, William. *Four Doors into Meeting for Worship* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 306, 1992).

Elizabeth Brown and Alec Davison eds. *Journeying the Heartlands: The Spiritual Practices of Quaker Worship* (London: The Kindlers Publications, 2008).

Online Articles:

Exploring the Unwritten Rules of Meeting for Worship (*Friends Journal*) – Debbie Humphries

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/exploring-unwritten-rules-meeting-worship/>

Worshiping Online (*Friends Journal*) – Rachel Guaraldi

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/online-quaker-worship/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you feel about the idea that worship is primarily about making ourselves available to God by adopting an attitude of inner stillness and deep listening? What other understandings of worship make sense to you?
2. What is your experience of silence and stillness? If you find it discomforting, why might that be? If you find it dynamic and full of meaning, can you describe what this has meant to you?
3. How do you respond to the suggestion that unprogrammed Quaker 'waiting' worship is like an internal and spiritualised version of "high church" liturgy? In what ways do both practices seek to nurture an intense experience of the divine presence?
4. Why do you think unprogrammed Quaker 'waiting' worship has enabled diverse pluralist communities to emerge within the Quaker tradition? What is it about this form of worship that has the capacity to hold so much difference within it?



Unprogrammed Quaker worship at Wandsworth Meeting, UK.

Stuart K Masters (2025)

Learning Resources 3.3

Programmed and Semi-Programmed Quaker Worship

In programmed and semi-programmed Quaker worship, the practice of attentive waiting (open worship) is supplemented by other pre-planned activities, such as hymns, prayers, Bible readings, and a spoken message. However, a period of waiting worship remains central and is best understood as Holy Communion in the manner of Friends:

By and large, Friends worship has a Protestant feel, but what distinguishes it is that the focus of the service is not the sermon, but the open worship – the period of silence that is sometimes very brief, but in some places takes up at least half the service.⁴

John Punshon

Pastoral and Evangelical Friends are concerned that, when worship is entirely unprogrammed, this can lead the worshipers to lose focus and drift away from the Christ-centred and biblical basis of their faith. The programming of worship, therefore, is not designed to replace a sense of divine guidance and leadership, but rather to help nurture it in the right way:

Worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influence of the Spirit of God. It stands neither in forms nor in the formal disuse of forms; it may be without words as well as with them, but it must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). We recognize the value of silence, not as an end but as a means toward the attainment of the end; a silence, not of listlessness or of vacant musing but of holy expectation before the Lord.⁵

The Richmond Declaration of Faith (1887)

In this form of Quaker worship, it remains important for the gathered people to be attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit and willing to respond to divine guidance when this is received:

For Friends, every meeting for worship is an adventure. Even when programming is planned, there needs to be a constant sensitivity to the Spirit that frees us to joyfully discard or re-arrange the planned programming.⁶

Phil Baisley

More information about programmed worship

Videos:

How do programmed Friends worship?

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/how-do-programmed-friends-worship/>

What is the difference between programmed and unprogrammed worship?

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/difference-between-programmed-unprogrammed-quaker-worship/>

⁴ John Punshon. *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001), 80.

⁵ The Richmond Declaration of Faith (1887) quoted in *Faith & Practice of Indiana Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (Richmond, IN: Indiana Yearly Meeting, 2018), 30.

⁶ Baisley, Phil. *The Same But Different: Ministry and the Quaker Pastor* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2018), 34.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. The earliest Friends combined a contemplative practice of waiting in silence with a strongly charismatic and embodied response. Can you see how programmed worship has recovered the more emotional and expressive aspects of this Quaker heritage?
2. In what ways might pre-planned singing, prayers, and messages deepen the communal experience of the divine presence?
3. Programmed Friends try to balance pre-planned activities with openness to the spontaneous movement of the Spirit. What challenges do you think this presents?
4. Why do you think that the practice of programming has become numerically the dominant form of Quaker worship in the world today? How do you feel about that?



Quaker worship at Berkeley Friends Church, California, USA.



Quaker worship at the Friends International Centre in Nairobi, Kenya.

Learning Resources 3.4

Vocal Ministry within Quaker Worship

Prophecy is a message from God conveyed through a human being. The early Quaker movement was a prophetic movement. In worship and preaching, what is said should be what has been given by God. This is the traditional understanding of vocal ministry within Quaker worship.

The intent of all speaking is to bring into the life, and to walk in, and to possess the same, and to live in and enjoy it, and to feel God's presence.

George Fox (1657)

Vocal ministry arises within the context of worship. It comes from a deep place and may not reflect normal thoughts and preoccupations. Friends make themselves available to receive a call to offer vocal ministry and seek to communicate it faithfully when this call is received and properly discerned.

Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one's mind. It's what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind.

Marrianne McMullen, 1987

Spoken messages received within Quaker worship should be given careful attention so that the deeper meaning behind the words can become clear. Everyone present has a part to play. Those who do not speak contribute to nurturing a sense of openness to the Spirit out of which vocal ministry can emerge.

Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others. Remember that we all share responsibility for the meeting for worship whether our ministry is in silence or through the spoken word.

Advices & Queries 12 (Britain Yearly Meeting)

More Information About Vocal Ministry

Videos:

Vocal Ministry and Quaker Meeting

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/mcneil-ministry/>

Giving Vocal Ministry

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/quaker-worship-pt-2-giving-vocal-ministry/>

When to Speak in Quaker Worship

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/when-to-speak-in-quaker-worship/>

Online Articles:

The Ministry of Listening (*Friends Journal*) – Paul Buckley

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/the-ministry-of-listening/>

Utterly Naked Before God (*Friends Journal*) – Christopher Sammond

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/utterly-naked-before-god/>

Books:

Rex Ambler. *Through Us, Not From Us: Vocal Ministry and Quaker Worship* (London: Kindlers Publications, 2015)

Barry Crossno and J. Brent Bill. *On Vocal Ministry: Nurturing the Community Through Listening and Faithfulness* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 460, 2019).

Rhiannon Grant. *Speaking in Quaker Meeting for Worship: what, when, how, and why* (Alresford: Christian Alternative Books, 2025)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What do you think are the strengths and potential challenges associated with a form of worship where anyone might speak if they feel called to do so?
2. Can you see how this aspect of Quaker practice is closer to Pentecostal and other charismatic forms of Christianity than to more liturgical forms of worship? How do you feel about that?
3. Why do you think personal discernment is so important when Friends feel the urge to offer vocal ministry? What challenges might this present?
4. In Pluralist Liberal Quaker worship, vocal ministry will be expressed using a very wide range of imagery and language? How might that shape the worship experience?



Giving vocal ministry within a Quaker Meeting for Worship.

Stuart K Masters (2025)

Learning Resources 3.5

Quaker Spiritual Practices

Within the Quaker tradition in all its forms, there is an emphasis on listening for, hearing, and obeying the divine voice (however this is understood). The purpose of Quaker spiritual practices, therefore, is to nurture and strengthen the human capacity to listen, hear and obey.

Do you try to set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the divine and to find the inward source of our strength. Seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life. Do you encourage in yourself and in others a habit of dependence on God's guidance for each day? Hold yourself and others in the Light, knowing that all are cherished by God.

Advices & Queries 3 (Britain Yearly Meeting)

Given that Friends have tended to reject any strict separation between the spiritual and physical dimensions of existence, their aspiration has always been to find ways to incorporate spiritual practices into all aspects of their lives.

Walk on the streets and chat with your friends. But every moment behind the scenes be in prayer, offering yourselves in continuous obedience... If you slip or stumble, and forget God for an hour, and assert your old proud self, and rely on your own clever wisdom, don't spend too much time in anguished regrets and self-accusations but begin again, just where you are.⁷

Thomas Kelly

Over the centuries, while Friends have emphasised an inward practice of attentiveness, they have also used writings that describe how the spirit of God has been active in other people's lives. This has helped them develop a greater sensitivity to the movement of the Spirit within their own lives. For example:

- The Bible
- Advices and Queries
- Other Devotional Writings
- Spiritual Autobiography

More Information About Quaker Spiritual Practices

Videos:

Quaker Spiritual Disciplines

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/quaker-spiritual-disciplines/>

How I Practice Throughout the Week

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/practice-quakerism-throughout-week/>

⁷ Thomas Kelly. *A Testament of Devotion* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1979), 60-61.

Writing a Spiritual Autobiography

<https://quakerspeak.com/video/autobiography/>

Books:

Loring, Patricia. *Listening Spirituality: Volume I, Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends* (Washington Grove, MD: Openings Press, 1997).

Richard J. Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008). <https://renovare.org/books/celebration-of-discipline>

Ginny Wall. *Deepening the Life of the Spirit: Resources for Spiritual Practice* (London: Quaker Books, 2012)

Online Articles

Quaker Spiritual Disciplines for Hard Times (*Friends Journal*) – Patricia McBee
<https://www.friendsjournal.org/quaker-spiritual-disciplines-hard-times/>

Cultivating Sacred Space Online (*Friends Journal*) – Ann Jerome
<https://www.friendsjournal.org/we-listen-as-god-listens/>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

5. How do you respond to the questions within Advices and Queries 3 (above)? Can you see the value in trying to follow this approach?
6. What is your experience of adopting a spiritual practice? What joys and challenges have accompanied this discipline?
7. What has helped you to become more aware of your inward life, and what have you found there?
8. Early Quaker spirituality had a strongly embodied dimension. In your experience, what sorts of physical activity are helpful in stilling the mind and sharpening your practice of attentiveness?