

## Silent Worship and Quaker Values: An Introduction

By Marsha Holliday

If you have never before attended an unprogrammed Friends (Quaker) meeting for worship, your first meeting may surprise you.

While all Quakers meet for worship to hear more clearly God's "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12), Friends in the unprogrammed tradition base our worship entirely on expectant waiting. We take the Psalmist's advice literally: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

We meet in plain, unadorned rooms because we feel that, in such places, we will be less distracted from that small still voice. Our benches or chairs face each other because we all are equal before God. There are no pulpits in our meeting rooms because we all minister to each other. We have no prearranged prayers, readings, sermons, hymns, or musical orchestrations because we wait for God's leadings (guidance and direction) and power in our lives.

Occasionally, during meeting for worship, someone is moved to speak out of the silence. Although Friends value spoken messages which come from the heart and are prompted by the Spirit of God, we also value the silence and find that expectant worship may bring profound leadings. Friends have found that some leadings are for sharing immediately, some are for sharing on another occasion, and some are for our personal reflection. The meeting ends when one Friend, designated in advance, shakes hands with his or her neighbors. Then everyone shakes hands. No two meetings are ever the same.

Like our style of worship, Quaker theology also differs from other religions. Because creeds could never fully represent all revelation and could limit or confine our perceptions of truth, Friends write no creeds. Instead, we write queries which help us reflect on our beliefs and actions; and yearly meetings, which are regional organizations of monthly meetings, record our common values and experiences in manuals entitled *Faith and Practice*.

Without creeds, Friends have become diverse in our beliefs about God. Nonetheless, Friends' common experience of God's presence within and among us has led us to realize that there is that of God, or something of the Divine, in everyone. This realization is central to Quakerism. It is confirmed in the Bible and referred to by Friends with such terms as "the Christ Within," "the Inward Light," and "the Seed of Truth." As Friends have attempted to respond to that of God in everyone, some common values have arisen that unite us.

Among them, Friends value life as sacred. Because there is that of God in everyone, Friends try to avoid all violence. We have found that when we hurt others, we harm ourselves and that of God in us. We try, instead, to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts and differences and to help others through service, the promotion of social and economic justice, kindness in daily living, and the support of each other's search for that of God within.

Similarly, God's inward presence is universal. Because there is that of God in everyone, anyone anywhere can experience God directly. Quakerism is just one way to know God, and authentic expressions of God's leadings are also found in other religions.

Moreover, Quakers were the first religion to recognize the equality of women and men. Since our beginning, almost 350 years ago, Quaker men and women have shared equally in the work of Friends, and Quaker schools have educated both girls and boys.

Because there is that of God in everyone, anyone at any time may express God's leadings. Therefore, revelation, or messages from God is continuous. Friends affirm that God inspired the writing of the Bible and other sacred literature and is still inspiring us. Although we are not always receptive, God continues to reveal Divine guidance and unchanging truth to all of us today, just as in the past.

To be more receptive to revelation, Friends practice simplicity and integrity. For Friends, simplicity is putting God first in one's life. Simplicity requires clear priorities and often inspires plainness and lack of clutter. Simplicity persuades one to affirm, not to flatter or overplay words or emotions and to avoid extravagance and paraphernalia. Simplicity requires integrity, which is honesty in all dealings, telling the truth in all occasions, and consistent adherence to one's values. Simplicity and integrity have much in common: just as simplicity avoids cluttering one's environment, integrity avoids complicating one's relationships.

Simplicity and integrity bring us closer to the truth, and truth is of such importance to us that, originally, our name was "The Religious Society of the Friends of Truth." The search for truth inspired George Fox, one of our founders, to refuse to swear in court to tell the truth, in part because of the biblical admonition against swearing (Matthew 5: 34-37), but also because swearing to tell the truth on one occasion implies that there are other occasions when one would not tell the truth.

Another consequence of Friends' search for truth is that scientific discoveries do not tend to challenge the basis of our faith. Like scientific method, Quaker faith and practice rely upon experience as a guide. We come to know truth experientially. The search for truth is more important to us than the maintenance of beliefs, and so we try to remain open to new approaches to the truth.

As we each possess a different perspective, the insights of community members help illuminate additional new approaches to the truth. Friends, therefore, bring our personal revelations to our communities for "clearness" in discerning the truth. The variety of insights within our communities also helps us achieve wholeness and balance.

Our search for truth has further confirmed that "way opens," situations change or circumstances develop, enabling us to find the direction in which to proceed. As we move in that direction, specific steps forward, which were not previously known to us, become apparent.

In our corporate search for truth, Friends use the worshipful Quaker process of decision making, a process for finding unity in all decisions which affect our communities. For Friends, unity is not usually unanimity, which is agreement without dissent. Unity is more often agreement with dissent, staying together despite differences and moving forward with guidance from our common values. It sometimes means that, out of respect for the unity of the whole, one may "stand aside."

Standing aside occurs when one allows a decision to go forward with which one is not entirely comfortable but for which one has no moral misgivings. For Friends, staying together despite differences is an important aspect of community. Friends realize that the more differing opinions we consider, the more closely we may come to the truth. In Friends' meeting for business, we refer to the experience of unity as "a sense of the meeting."

While invigorating, Quaker diversity is not usually easy. The differing opinions and beliefs of individual Friends are challenging to many Friends and to many Friends' meetings. Although Friends have our roots in Christianity, some individual Friends do not call themselves Christians. Moreover, those Friends who are Christians may have differing definitions of Christianity. We have unitarian and trinitarian Friends, evangelical and nonevangelical Friends. Some Friends attend other religious services as well as meeting for worship.

Despite our diversity, Friends find that we can live in accordance with our common values. When we do, our values become our testimonies, or witness, to the world. Friends' testimonies on peace, equality, simplicity, integrity, truth, community, and diversity have evolved over time and are the outward expressions of Friends' attempts to turn our idealism into action.

Friends value actions which reflect our ideals. Not only do Friends expect that we can live Divinely inspired lives, we expect that, with Divine power and guidance, we can attain social justice and peace on earth.

That we do not always attain the ideal does not mean we will not continue to strive for it. Consequently, in our meetings for worship and business and in our daily lives, Friends try to manifest our common values: life is sacred; God's inward presence is experienced universally; revelation is continuous; simplicity, integrity, community, and diversity are essential in the search for truth; truth and unity are goals for worship and business; and way opens, making the ideal attainable. These values follow from our realization that there is that of God in everyone.

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*Marsha Holliday, a member of Langley Hill Friends Meeting, works as the Associate Secretary for Baltimore Yearly Meeting. She and her husband, George, live in Washington, DC, and have two daughters, Lara and Sara.*

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