

## Vocal ministry

- 2.55 Remember that to every one is given a share of responsibility for the meeting for worship, whether that service be in silence or through the spoken word. Do not assume that vocal ministry is never to be your part. If the call to speak comes, do not let the sense of your own unworthiness, or the fear of being unable to find the right words, prevent you from being obedient to the leading of the Spirit. Ask wisdom of God that you may be sure of your guidance and be enabled humbly to discern and impart something of his glory and truth. Pray that your ministry may rise from the place of deep experience, and that you may be restrained from unnecessary and superficial words. Faithfulness and sincerity in speaking, even very briefly may open the way to fuller ministry from others. Try to speak audibly and distinctly, with sensitivity to the needs of your fellow worshippers. Wait to be sure of the right moment for giving the message. Beware of making additions towards the end of meeting when it was well left before.

*Advices, 1964*

- 2.56 Jane Fenn, a young woman who migrated to Philadelphia in 1712 and became in time a travelling Quaker minister of note, describes sitting in meeting one day and hearing an inner voice declare that she had been chosen for the ministry:

Yet I must confess, this awful word of Divine command shocked me exceedingly, my soul and all within me trembled at the hearing of it; yea my outward tabernacle shook insomuch that many present observed the deep exercise I was under. I cried in spirit, 'Lord I am weak and altogether incapable of such a task, I hope thou wilt spare me from such a mortification, besides I have spoken much against women appearing in that manner.'

For six or seven months, Jane Fenn continued to resist the command to speak in meeting, until she could withstand the pressure no longer. She stood up to utter a few broken words and returned home rejoicing. Nevertheless, for many years thereafter, she continued to struggle with her sense of inadequacy when confronted with the growing demands of the Spirit that she not only preach to local meetings, but also travel through the colonies and eventually back to England.

Margaret Hope Bacon, 1986

- 2.57 I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind and endeavoured to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the true Shepherd. And one day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting, but not keeping close to the divine opening, I said more than was required of me and being soon sensible to my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks, without any light or comfort, even

to that degree that I could take satisfaction in nothing. I remembered God and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity upon me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offense, and my mind became calm and quiet, being truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. And after this, feeling the the spring of divine love opened, and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting in which I found peace. This I believe was about six weeks from the first time, and as I was thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the true spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock.

John Woolman, 1741

2.58 For weeks before this particular Sunday I had been puzzling over and questioning in my mind various problems connected with my work. It was one of those episodes of spiritual upheaval which most of us go through from time to time when we seem to question our normal certainties, poke around the foundations of our normal life and discover to our alarm that some of them are very shaky. I had been in this highly charged state for several weeks.

On this Sunday morning though, I went quietly to meeting with the family, my recent preoccupations submerged by the business of getting all dressed and breakfasted and to the meeting house on time. But as the minutes ticked by and I sat in the healing peace, I began to be aware that something inside me was formulating a question which urgently needed to be asked. I say 'something inside me' because it seemed at the time to be both me and not me. I discovered to my horror that this something was urging me to get up and ask my question. My heart was pounding uncomfortably and I began to shiver (I don't know if this was obvious to those around me; I was certainly aware of this shivering but shyness prevents one from asking afterwards whether these physical symptoms are visible to others). To start with I resisted this prompting. I looked round the room and noticed several Friends before I was reluctant to make a fool of myself. I could not get up and speak in front of them. I would rather die first. But not for long. Soon it started up again, insistent, not to be denied. This time I told myself 'I'll count twenty and then if no one else has spoken I shall have to.' Again a slight abatement of the symptoms. But to no avail, I counted twenty and then fifty and still no one spoke. Now I sat conscious only of this overpowering force which was pushing me to my feet and finally I had to give in to it.

Afterwards I found it difficult to believe that I had spoken. It was all over so quickly. Had I really stood up in front of all those people and testified? Well, hardly testified, but yes, I had been driven by some

inner prompting which, for want of a more precise word, one might well call spirit; and yes, I had quaked, most fearfully, with something which was more than just the fear of making a fool of myself before family and friends.

Elizabeth Salisbury, 1968

- 2.59 Some think, through a mistaken judgment, that they must be doing something every meeting, (like the preachers of the letter, who must either be singing, preaching or praying all the time) and by such a conduct they loose their interest and place in the hearts of friends by too long and too frequent appearing in both preaching and prayer: For the avoiding of which, keep close to thy gift, intently waiting to know thy place, both when to speak and when to be silent; and when thou speakest, begin under a sense of divine influence, whether it be preaching or praying; and without it, do not either preach or pray.

Samuel Brownas, 1750.

- 2.60 All true ministry spring from the reality of experience, and uses our gifts of heart and mind in its experience. But ministry is not the place for intellectual exercise. It comes through us, not from us. Although we interpret the Spirit it is that Spirit which will lead us to minister. The Spirit will decide which experiences are relevant and which will speak to the condition of the meeting. If you have to decide whether it is right to peak, consider that it isn't. If your words are important the meeting will find them anyway.

Conference: *Exploring the fundamental elements of Quakerism*, 1986.

- 2.61 Ministry should be necessity, and not of choice, and there is no living by silence, or by preaching merely.

John Churchman, 1734

- 2.62 In Friends' meetings also, from the fact that everyone is free to speak, one hears harmonies and correspondences between various utterances such as are scarcely to be met elsewhere. It is sometimes as part-singing compared with unison. The free admission of the ministry of women, of course, greatly enriches this harmony. I have often wondered whether some of the motherly counsels I have listened to in our meeting would not reach some hearts that might be closed to the masculine preacher.

Caroline E. Stephen, 1890

- 2.63 When language is used unthinkingly, without being related to the experience of either the speaker or the listener, it is meaningless. Words are not only symbols and when there is no shared experience

the symbolism breaks down. When we speak of our own experience, our feelings are always involved. The same is true when we listen to others; we may read more into their words meanings which are not intended but which reflect our own emotions. Certain words or kinds of language may arouse such strong emotions that we are only able to relate them to our own experience and not to that of the speaker. Speakers too may be unaware of the effect of their words. The more important and profound the subject matter, the greater the need for sensitivity in choosing our words. This is no excuse for playing safe in what we say, or for not listening to others when what they say makes us uncomfortable.

Conference: *Exploring the fundamental elements of Quakerism*, 1986

- 2.64 Each Friend who feels called upon to rise and deliver a lengthy discourse might question himself – and herself – most searchingly, as to whether the message could not be more lastingly given in the fewest possible words, or even through his or her personality alone, in entire and trustful silence. 'Cream must always rise to the surface.' True. But other substances rise to the surface besides cream; substances that may have to be skimmed off and thrown away before bodies and souls can be duly nourished. Is my message cream or scum?' may be an unusual and is certainly a very homely query. Still it is one that every speaker, in a crowded gathering especially, should honestly face. Some of the dangers of silent worship can best be guarded against by its courtesies.

Violet Holdsworth, 1919

- 2.65 In the Life
- My piece was pat and all ready to say;  
She rose first. I threw my piece away.  
My well-turned stuff  
Was not so rough  
As hers, but easy elegant and smooth.  
Beginning middle end  
It had and point  
And aptly quoted prophet priest and poet.  
Hers was uncouth  
Wanting in art  
Laboured scarce-audible and out of joint.  
Three times she lost the thread  
And sitting left her message half unsaid.  
'Why then did thee throw it  
Into the discard?'  
Friend,  
It had head  
(Like this). Hers oh had heart.

Robert Hewson, 1965

- 2.66 Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on ones' 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.

Marrienne McMullen, 1987

- 2.67 To some are granted deeper spiritual discoveries and revelations than to others, but to all, waiting in expectancy, at moments and in some measure is given a sense of the living touch of God. At such moments there may come the kindling of mind and heart which impels obedience to speak under the immediate promptings of the Holy Spirit. This is the ministry of inspiration, the prophetic ministry in the true sense, when the spoken word pierces to the heart of our relationship with God, unveils the living presence of Christ in the midst of the worshipping group and in its separate members, opens to our sight the way we must tread if we would realize that Spirit in and through our ordinary daily activities and find the creative response to the challenges of our time. In ministry and of this character and depth something is given in the utterance which is beyond the intellectual and emotional capacity of the human being speaking, but which uses and enhances and transcends the natural gifts, the acquired knowledge, the hard and honest thoughts of the reaches of the speaker's imagination.

There is also the ministry of teaching which combines 'the potency of prayer and thought'. It recalls the meeting to the discoveries of truth, the perception of the acts of God in the lives of individuals. It includes the effort to understand and to interpret the central fact of Jesus Christ and his place in history, and the searchings and findings of men and women down the ages and in our own day as they have sought to relate new discoveries and insights to their understandings of eternal truth.

1967; 1994

- 2.68 In my tempestuous days I heard many things in the Friends' meeting that I disliked and some that seemed to me quite false, and I felt the need to insist on answer them. I was taught, and I believe correctly, that to insist on answering there and then would be to destroy the meeting; and that we all sit under the baptising power of the spirit of Truth, which is its own witness. We sit in silence so as not to trip over words; and we trust the good in each other which is from God, so that we may be kept from evil.

J. Omerod Greenwood, 1980

2.69 A Friends' meeting for worship finds no room for debate or for answering (still less for contradicting) one another; if this is desirable, it will be left for another occasion. And if anything should seem to be spoken amiss, the spiritually minded worshipper will have the wit to get at the heart of the message, overlooking crudity and lack of skill in its presentation, and so far from giving way to irritation at what seems unprofitable. He will be deeply concerned for his own share of creating the right spiritual atmosphere in which the harm fades out and the good grows. Many a meeting has known this power, transforming what might have been hurtful into a means of grace.

A. Neave Bradshaw, 1921

2.70 I think that learning to move in the exercise of the meeting, so that one is a part of it, yet taken beyond it and brought to see some new light as a result of it, is most important in creative ministry. The cluster of messages, with a fair interval of silence between each of them to let its message sink in; the cluster that goes on down, with each message deepening and intensifying and helping to light up a further facet of communication, can be most effective. But for this to happen those sharing in it cannot be in a discussional frame of mind or in a debating stance, or yield to the ruthlessly critical frame of mind or in a debating stance, or yield to the ruthlessly critical mind, or all is lost and the meeting is pulled into a forum. It can only be done if there is willingness to be led by each of the ones ministering into a deeper level of what they were not only saying but what they were meaning to say, and perhaps even beyond into what something beneath us all was meaning to have aid through what we were saying . . . When a cluster ministry moves in this way, we all know that we are moving in the life, that we are breaking the cerebral barrier and being released . . . and we are ourselves ignited by what is taking place.

Douglas Steere, 1972

2.71 It should be the care of elders to foster the spiritual life of all members and to give caution and advice to Friends who share in the vocal ministry. They should look out for Friends who may be likely to help the ministry and lead them to make their right contribution to the life of the meeting, and to encourage our members to think deeply on the great issues and problems of life and the fundamentals of our faith.

This, however, is not the duty of elders alone; as any Friends may hinder the work of the ministry by a critical or unloving spirit, so their sympathy and prayers for those who speak will help to create an atmosphere in which an inspired and inspiring ministry may grow. A

friendly word of thankfulness from one who has been helped is often a great source of encouragement to the minister.

1925; 1959

*For more about eldership see chapter 12 Caring for one another.*

- 2.72 He had an extraordinary gift in opening the Scriptures. He would go to the marrow of things and show the mind, harmony and fulfilling of them with much plainness and to great comfort and edification . . . But above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behaviour, and the fewness and fullness of his words have often struck even strangers with admiration, as the used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer. And truly it was a testimony that he knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men; for they that know him most will see no reason to approach him with reverence and fear.

William Penn writing of George Fox, 1694

- 2.73 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

**Quaker Faith and Practice, *The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 1995; Chapter 2: Approaches to God – worship and prayer.**

(Section numbering retained as well as spellings.)  
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