

The Quaker Experience

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:16)

Quakers directly experience a radically loving Spirit guiding us to live justly and peaceably; this Spirit is available to all.

Friends use many words to refer to this inward spiritual reality, including: Christ; the Power; the Life; Spirit; Sacred; God; the Inward Light; the Inward Teacher; the Holy; the Divine; Reality; the Seed; Word; Truth; that of God in everyone. Ultimately this spiritual reality is beyond words. When Friends encounter words for the Divine that do not speak to their condition, they are encouraged to receive them with an open heart and perhaps substitute another word.

The first Friends experienced the dynamic reality of the Inward Light through the lens of the Bible.

The early Quakers explained that they were guided by the Light of Christ within them, the divine Light that existed in the beginning, incarnated in Jesus, and animates all created beings. Looking carefully at Scripture, they found many references that described and confirmed their experience. They did not claim to have received something new, but...to have rediscovered the vibrant original form of true Christian faith. At the same time, they recognized that this divine Light is active not only in Christians but...[active in] everyone as an Inward Teacher. (Marcelle Martin, 2016)

Today, within BYM, a wide range of theologies are represented, ranging from traditional Christian to nontheist. So, what unites us? The 1964 Statement on Spiritual Unity, adopted when the Orthodox and Hicksite yearly meetings came back together to form a consolidated Baltimore Yearly Meeting, offers an answer.

Friends...are clear on certain principles which are so basic and essential that we tend to take them for granted and forget that they are essential and probably the only essentials.

- *We all are clear that religion is a matter of inward, immediate experience.*
- *We all acknowledge the guidance of the Inner Light...[and the possibility of] continuing revelation].*
- *All our insights are subject to testing by the insight of the group, by history and tradition, and by the Bible and the whole literature of religion.*
- *Worship is primarily on the basis of expectant waiting upon the Spirit...in which mediators or symbols are not necessary.*
- *We are all clear that faith is directly expressed in our daily living.*
- *We all seek to move toward goals of human welfare, equality, and peace.*

Friends meetings are communities of worshippers who open our hearts to the Inward Teacher and support each other as we turn our lives over to the Spirit. We strive to be welcoming and inclusive. We seek to love and care for one another through both good times and bad. This love is extended to work in the world for justice, peace, care for the earth, and the well-being of all.

When we open ourselves to the Spirit we are inevitably changed.

We are transformed individually and collectively in order to become agents of transformation in the world. That's what it means to be a Quaker. ([Ben Pink Dandelion, 2014](#))

Meeting for Worship

The silence we value is not the mere outward silence of the lips. It is a deep quietness of heart and mind, a laying aside of all preoccupations with passing things—yes even the workings of our own minds, a resolute fixing of the heart upon that which is unchangeable and eternal. ([Caroline Emelia Stephen, 1891](#))

Meeting for Worship is the center of every Friends meeting. Most Friends meetings within BYM practice worship based in silence, without a designated pastor. It is the form of Quaker worship that most closely parallels that of the first Friends. Early Friends experienced that the guidance of the Inward Teacher could be discerned directly. In the mid-1600s, they created an enduring form of silent worship that fosters direct experience of the Divine and continuing revelation.

In worship we enter into stillness of body and mind in order to feel that Spirit of love within us and among us, to give ourselves over to it, and discern what it would have us do in our lives.

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God... ([George Fox, 1658](#))

Reaching this place of stillness is sometimes referred to as “centering.” It is not something that happens automatically. Some people center by breathing; some by remembering a poem or song or prayer of importance to them; some by silently welcoming each person in the room into their hearts and surrounding them with love. Centering is letting go of the mundane, so we can open our hearts to know the Divine and hear the Spirit speak through us.

It is not a time for "thinking," for deliberate, intellectual exercise. It is a time for spiritual receptivity, so it is important not to clog one's mind with its own busy activities. Nonetheless, thoughts will occur in the silence. Some thoughts will be distractions and should be set aside...But some thoughts or images or feelings may arise that seem to come from a deeper source and merit attention. ([Chel Avery, 2011](#))

Quaker worship is a communal process. We are supported and grounded by other worshippers who are also opening themselves to the workings of the Inward Light. Our worship is more deeply grounded when Friends come with hearts and minds prepared by a week of faithful living. This faithful living can prepare us to be fully present to each other in worship and open us to hear the Spirit in both the silence and the messages shared.

We expect to encounter God in our lives, in our worship, in our work, and in our lives together. ([Carl Magruder, 2021](#))

Sometimes during worship, the Spirit leads one or more Friends to offer vocal ministry out of the silence. Vocal ministry arises out of a leading, a persistent sense that one is being compelled to rise and allow the Spirit to use one's heart and mind to speak aloud. The term “Quaker” was originally an insult applied to Friends because they sometimes trembled when moved to speak in meeting for worship.

If you do feel moved to speak, take a moment to test your leading. Traditionally, questions like the following have helped in this process of discernment: Is this message from the Spirit, or somewhere else? If it is from God, is it meant only for me, or for the entire Meeting? Even if meant for the entire Meeting, is now the right time? ([Worship and Ministry, Lancaster Friends Meeting, 1998](#))

If the message is not meant to be delivered now, simply acknowledge it internally and return to expectant waiting. If led to speak, deliver the message with as few words as possible, yet as many as necessary.

Once I sat in meeting for worship absolutely certain that I had a message which needed to be shared. However, I felt no leading...that I was the one to give the message. I waited and waited, feeling I would burst from the tension, until a woman across the room got up and gave [the] message much better than I could ever have given it. ([Shirley Dodson, 1980](#))

Some Friends are led to speak frequently, and others only rarely; yet the timid or brief message of a child or adult who seldom speaks may be as moving and helpful as that of a person more practiced in ministry. The experienced speaker should be watchful not to speak too often or at undue length. Typically space is left between messages so there is time to absorb the ministry. Friends should not come to meeting for worship with an intention to speak or an intention not to speak.

In Meeting for Worship, we come together to support and sustain each other as we seek the direct experience of the Divine. We open our hearts so Spirit may heal us, teach us, lead us, and enfold us in infinite love and peace. In worship, we can feel the profound connections we have with each other and the natural world; we can experience repentance, forgiveness, and guidance on how we may change. As worship deepens, the Light may reveal impediments to giving and receiving healing and love. Worship renews and strengthens us to return to the world with inspired vision and commitment to live faithfully.

It is now rare and wondrous when Friends experience what is called a “gathered meeting,” when those present unite on a deep level.

In the Quaker practice of group worship...come special times when an electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, and a quickening Presence pervades us...an objective, dynamic Presence which enfolds us all [and] nourishes our souls... ([Thomas Raymond Kelly, 1944](#))

Everyone in our Quaker community is important to our worship, regardless of age or length of participation in Meeting, including infants and young children. Even when Friends experience spiritual emptiness, their presence adds to the community and completes it. It is possible to go through long periods of spiritual dryness and feel a great emptiness in life, even despair. With consistent participation in worship and other activities, we can discover or regain spiritual grounding.

*Tears I've known and pain and sorrow past all trying,
this way I've come so sharp, so cruel each turn.
My faith I've flown as some small kite aflying,
atop the wind and sometimes far below,
But always through the weariness of trying.
This much I feel and find it ever odd,
my faith in spite of everything keeps straining up to God. ([Helen Morgan Brooks, 1990](#))*

Sometimes there can be disruptions to the flow of worship. A message may be jarring or challenging, yet the words shared may ultimately deepen the worship experience. **Other times, a message may be shared that doesn't speak to your condition.** Let it go; it may be meant for someone else. If a person repeatedly speaks in ways that are disruptive or harmful to the health of the meeting, the committee in your meeting responsible for worship will respond. If a meeting struggles unsuccessfully with a situation like this, the BYM Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee is a potential resource for support.

Over centuries, Quaker worship has evolved into various forms, influenced by different leadings and cultures both within our Yearly Meeting and in the wider Religious Society of Friends. Friends have a living, growing faith that doesn't remain static. While most BYM meetings practice waiting worship grounded in silence, more Quakers in the world today practice a primarily vocal form of worship facilitated by designated leaders. These worship services may include exuberance, Bible verses, hymns, praise singing, prepared and spontaneous messages, and a planned movement through the time together. Some meetings include a period of expectant waiting, sometimes called "open worship," as part of a planned worship service. Some local meetings conduct more than one form of worship for their community as part of their weekly activities, and benefit from that variety. Among Friends from cultures where interior, unspoken prayer is largely unknown, meetings for worship may include periods when worshipers simultaneously offer individual prayers aloud, confident that God hears all prayers. In all forms of Quaker worship, Friends transcend self and together enter into unity with the Spirit. Truth continues to be revealed.