

The Religious Society of Friends

OUR MESSAGES AND OUR MESSAGE-BEARERS

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plenary sessions.

I speak this evening as one of the older Friends at this Gathering and I hope that you do not feel that there are only disadvantages in such a status. Actually there are many advantages in being a senior or so-called "seasoned citizen." One of them is having lived long enough to have gained some perspective, hopefully, for viewing the present and the future. That is as true of events in the Religious Society of Friends as in other areas of life.

For example, in my lifetime:

- . . . the American Friends Service Committee, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the Friends Council on Education, and other groups have been formed.
- . . . Pendle Hill, the Earlham School of Religion, and several conference centers have been established.
- . . . several Friends schools and two Quaker colleges have been founded.
- . . . many new Meetings and several yearly meetings have been set up in the United States and abroad, and the Friends World Committee for Consultation has been formed as a result of our growing awareness of the global family of Friends.

- . . . there has been an increasing dialogue among the different groups of Quakers in this country, increased cooperation with the other Historic Peace Churches, and some cautious moves toward cooperation with other religious groups and world faiths.
- . . . and, most important, many of us have taken part in a search for our identity as a religious society.

These and other significant developments are encouraging signs of growth. I am glad for them and grateful to those who have helped to bring them about, including many of you here this evening.

Nevertheless, as I think about our small, scattered, fragile, fragmented — yet remarkable — and resilient Society, I often wonder whether the comment of Neave Brayshaw, a prominent and beloved English Friend early in this century, still holds true. His comment was:

The Society is increasing its activities at the circumference, but the center is weak.

Could that be true today?

Our Three Wishes for Quakerism in the Foreseeable Future

Some of you are familiar with the Three Wishes Test which is widely used as a diagnostic device with children. If you were asked to state your three wishes for the Religious Society of Friends in the foreseeable future, what would you say?

Perhaps you will think about this and share some of your thoughts in your worship-sharing groups throughout the rest of this week — and later, in your home Meeting. That should be a profitable exercise for all who are involved.

Having posed this question, perhaps I should share with you *my* three wishes for our Society in the last few years of this century and in the opening years of the 21st century. They are:

1. The continuation of our rigorous and prayerful search for our identity at this important juncture of history.
2. Consequently, a clearer idea of the messages of Friends in these times.
3. The development of a large number of message-bearers or interpreters of the unique messages of Friends for our day.

There are other wishes I have, but nearly all of them flow from those three inter-related points. Many of those subordinate wishes have been or will be represented in different phases of our Gathering this week. Tonight I want to concentrate on Wishes Two and Three, and therefore, indirectly, on Wish One.

The Many Messages of Friends

Over a period of several decades I have read the announcements of meetings and conferences on such themes as: Do Friends Have a Message for Today? — or What Is THE Message of Friends?

In recent years, however, I have become disenchanted with and even disturbed by such topics. First, because those who devised them seemed to have had misgivings about whether we have anything to say in these troubled times. And second, because such titles assume that there is a single message.

To question whether we have any message seems to me preposterous. In fact, I become so distraught by that suggestion that I should probably be elated by my lack of forbearance.

It is so very clear to me that Fox and the early Friends came closer than any group in centuries in carrying out the two commandments of Jesus that:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind—

and

Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

In fact, Emil Fuchs—a great German theologian, church historian, and Quaker—once said to me that Fox rather than Luther should be known as the Prophet of the Reformation. Emil pointed out that Luther and Fox both started out with a burning desire to restore the vitality and authenticity of first-century Christianity. But Luther, he said, lost the purity of his purpose in compromises with the political powers of his day, whereas Fox never lost his clear vision of Christianity revived.

But that was 300 years ago, you may say. What about today?

Those basic beliefs of early Christians and early Quakers were certainly timeless — and therefore timely. Our task today is to rediscover and reclaim our inheritance, to reshape and extend it for our contemporary world, to rephrase it in simple and modern terminology, — and to live it.

In fact, that message or those messages may be even more timely today than in the past. That is what Kenneth Boulding maintained in his perceptive and powerful Backhouse Lecture to the Australian Yearly Meeting in 1964, later reprinted as a Pendle Hill pamphlet. To that group he said:

I believe that the evolutionary potential of the Quaker mutation is far from exhausted and indeed has hardly begun to show its full effects. I believe, furthermore, that the Society of Friends has a vital role to play in the future development of mankind, — small perhaps in quantity but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden it may imply, would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole . . . I think Quakerism is an example of a mutation which was in a sense premature . . .

What a breath-taking possibility that statement presents!

And what about the question as to whether there is “a” Quaker message for this period in history? Our faith is so multifaceted that I doubt it can be encapsulated in a few words. But the idea of reducing it to a single word or a short phrase is enticing and it should be instructive to see what some Friends have decided is the central word or concept of Quakerism — and to try to do the same, ourselves.

William Wistar Comfort once declared that *silence* is the dominant theme of our movement. Gerald Hibbert wrote that *openness* is our central concept. Edmund

Hillpern suggested that *the corporate search* is the most characteristic quality of Quakerism. Rufus Jones once said that *direct access to God* was our outstanding belief. Elsewhere he referred to Quakerism as *a way of life*.

In his classic volume on *Friends for 300 Years*, Howard Brinton made a more elaborate statement, declaring that in his opinion:

The best type of religion is one in which the mystical, the evangelical, the rational, and the social are so related that each exercises a restraint on the others . . . In Quakerism (however) the optimum is not equality in rank . . . The mystical is basic.

In his persuasive Pendle Hill pamphlet on *Quakerism of the Future* John Yungblut came to a similar conclusion, listing our central concepts as *mystical, prophetic, and evangelical*.

Perhaps I should digress here a moment as many of you may be squirming in your seats, disturbed by that word “evangelical.” But when two men of the spiritual stature of Howard Brinton and John Yungblut, coming out of very different religious backgrounds, conclude that that word is central in Quakerism, it should make us stop and think.

By evangelical they were certainly not referring to the evangelistic methods so many of us deplore; they were referring to a deeply-felt commitment to the Gospel, The Good News, as practiced—and preached—by Jesus. In that sense it is possible—and important—to be evangelical without being evangelistic.

Many of us are disturbed by the excesses of religious emotionalism; some have even been damaged by such practices. But is it possible that in our zeal to avoid emotionalism, we have become exclusively intellectual and overly sophisticated, in our approach to religion?

Many of us are passionate about our

social concerns; should we not be just as passionate about our spiritual commitments? Perhaps, as I have written elsewhere, the Religious Society of Friends today is a little like a banked fire, with warm ashes, but in need of fresh kindling and some vigorous stirring. Perhaps God, The Great Blacksmith, needs to use His bellows on us.

To return to my main theme, it seems to me difficult and possibly even dangerous to try to summarize the broad sweep of Quakerism in a few simple and often loaded words.

Then, as I was thinking about this talk, I picked up Mortimer Adler's volume on *Six Great Ideas*. The contents of that book did not speak to my condition. But the title intrigued me and spurred me into thinking about the six great ideas of Quakerism. I commend such a search to you this week—and after this Gathering. Perhaps the process of searching for a few key ideas will be even more important than the end product.

I do think that we are in general agreement on at least these six great ideas:

1. The possibility of direct access to God by everyone.
2. The belief that something of the Divine is implanted in each human being at birth—a belief with enormous implications in every aspect of life.
3. The undergirding of our lives and the life of our Religious Society by our Judaic-Christian tradition and the centrality of Jesus, while we seek, also, to learn from other religions.
4. The conviction that creation continues and revelation persists, — a faith that impels us to search unrelentingly for Truth.
5. Corporate openness to the leadings of the Light — in our Meetings for wor-

ship, for Business, for Learning, and in other group gatherings.

6. An informed and passionate concern for a peaceful, just, and humane world, and a sense of responsibility, individually and collectively, to work for such a society.

At this point I would like to approach the idea of the message or messages of Friends from another angle. Several years ago I was asked to speak at the 100th anniversary of the construction of the 15th Street Meetinghouse in New York City. In that large audience were many friends of Friends and I felt led to speak to them, as one part of my address, on the central ideas of Quakerism, stressing their contemporary relevance. Edited and slightly expanded, this was my message. As I read it, perhaps you will think about some “near-Friend” and consider how well these remarks might speak to him or her.

To Inquirers About the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

If you are repulsed by the idea that God is dead, we invite you to join with us in our continuing search for Divine leadership in our lives, believing as we do that God is very much alive and eager to speak to all of us, any time, anywhere, and on any subject, if we are ready to listen and talk with the Divine. A leading Friend, Rufus Jones, once wrote that there is a double search going on constantly—human beings seeking God and God seeking human beings.

If you decry the secularism and materialism of our times, we encourage you to identify with us in our belief that purposeful living is fundamentally spiritual, and permeates every aspect of our lives.

If you are distressed by the conformity of our age and the disregard for the precious nature of every individual, we welcome you as fellow seekers in a religious society which believes that something of the Divine is implanted in each of us at birth and that treasures individuality, but tempers it with the wisdom of the group—under Divine Guidance.

If you are disturbed by the frenetic pace of modern life with its attendant pressures, tensions, and anxieties, we invite you to our fellowship as we strive to simplify our lives and gain a sense of inner peace for living in times like these.

If you shudder at the military might of our own and other nations and at the threat of a nuclear holocaust, we urge you to join with us in finding ways to implement the historic Peace Testimony of Friends, opposing all wars and preparations for wars and seeking to remove the causes of conflicts.

If you are discouraged by your individual efforts to help create a better world, we would like to point to the many projects in which Quakers are involved—locally, nationally, and internationally—in our attempts to bring freedom, justice, and more creative living to people in many places. We encourage you to work with us in some of these important undertakings.

If you consider creeds archaic and even intellectually dishonest, Friends offer you the creedless church. We share many common beliefs and approaches to life, but we encourage individuals to develop their own beliefs and patterns of living. Hence you will find a great variety of viewpoints in our groups.

If you are put off by the paraphernalia and programs of most churches, Friends welcome you to our worship services, where we wait upon God in expectant silence. We believe that in such periods of quiet we can tap the spiritual resources which will enable us to live more calmly, more compassionately, and more creatively in this chaotic age.

If you have been helped by some of the practices of Eastern religions but have felt that those faiths concentrate upon individual worship to the neglect of corporate waiting upon God, and bypass social action, we suggest that you explore the faith and practices of Friends. We stress individual *and* group worship and combine the vertical relationship to God with the horizontal relationship with other human beings.

If you are repelled by the practices of many Christians, we urge you to consider with us ways in which we can reclaim the best in our Judeo-Christian tradition and rediscover Jesus of Nazareth as The Great Revealer of the grandeur of God and the potential greatness of human beings who live in the Light—as well as to try to ferret out with us the many truths in other world religions.

If you are concerned about the rights of women, we point with pride to the place accorded them in the Society of Friends for over 300 years and to current efforts of many Quakers on this issue.

If you are interested in democracy in religion, we suggest you read about and participate in a group which tries to practice a unique form of religious democracy in its business sessions, as well as elsewhere.

If you are disturbed by the loneliness of life in our large metropolitan areas, Friends point out that their meetings are intended as homes away from home: caring communities, spiritual fellowships, societies of friends.

As you come to know us better, you will realize that this is an idealistic statement of Friends. It is what we aim to accomplish, not what we are always able to achieve.

You will quickly discern our shortcomings, our faults, and our failures. We are not saints. Becoming a Quaker brings with it no halos, no plaques for perfection, no passports to heaven. It is more like a learner's permit for the lifelong journey toward truth and fulfillment—a journey made more meaningful and easier by the companionship of other seekers.

Those remarks, addressed to friends of Friends, reveal the many-sided nature of our Quaker message. One of the tragedies of Quakerism in the United States is that we have taken the *total* message of Friends and divided it among various groups, with each specializing in some parts of it. Perhaps in the coming decades we can develop a message which combines in a creative way all those segments—the historic Christ and the inward Christ, equality, simplicity, rationalism and education, the Bible, social concern, and outreach. What a powerful message that would make!

If we have “a” message, I feel it is a multi-faceted one.

Some of Our Methods as Friends

Time will not permit an extended comment on the methods of Friends. But I would feel remiss if I did not emphasize that a part of the genius of early Quakers—or a Divine revelation if you will—was their discovery of several practices which are peculiar to us and unique not only in Christian history but in religious history. They, too, might be considered a part of our message for these critical times: Among them are:

The Meeting for Worship—the Quaker communion service – a remarkable and revolutionary method of waiting upon God in holy obedience.

The Meeting for Business – a rare form of religious democracy practiced only by Friends, based on the belief that Divine Guidance is as available in transacting group business as it is in conducting group worship.

The Queries – those probing, searching questions by which our consciences are pricked and by which Quakers are prodded—individually and collectively—to examine their faith and their practices.

The Advices—one way in which Friends nudge each other into leading more integrated and meaningful lives.

To these one might possibly add our annual State of the Society reports and our Clearness Committees.

Some Specific Questions About Our Messages Today

At this point I would like to be more specific as to some of the questions we should ask ourselves currently about our message or our messages. I do not have the time or the talent to elaborate on each point in this Agenda for the Future of Friends. But I submit these questions for personal consideration, for consideration in your worship-study groups this week, and for consideration in your local Meetings when you return home. A rigorous examination of them should keep you busy for months and contribute to your personal growth, the growth of your Meeting, and the revitalization of the Religious Society of Friends in the United States and in the wider world. Here are 12 such important questions:

1. Can we retain and reinforce our basic Judaic-Christian foundation and also reach out to persons of other faiths or world religions?
2. Can we rediscover and restore the incomparable figure of Jesus to his rightful place in our Society? (I wonder sometimes if modern liberal Quakers have substituted Gandhi for God and John Woolman for Jesus).
3. Can we reclaim the Bible and saturate ourselves in it, realizing the relevance of many parts of it for our times—adding, then, insights from other great religious writings to that incomparable book?
4. Admitting that we are pygmies in prayer, can we become giants in that fundamental aspect of lives worth living?
5. Can we draw a large enough circle to include in our fellowship persons of a wide range of beliefs—from Christocentric to Universalist Quakers?
6. Can we encourage fellowship with other groups of Friends in this continent and around the world, bearing in mind what one evangelical Quaker said recently—that “It may be that the most loving thing we could do for each other would be to set each other free to be himself or herself?” Recognizing differences, can we concentrate on what unites us more than on what divides us?
7. Can we remove the burden of our Puritan past and revel in the contributions the arts can give us and our beloved Society?
8. Can we accept a variety of life styles and sexual practices among our members rather than seeking to impose a single standard for everyone?
9. Can we reexamine our lack of appeal to many children and young people and try to ascertain what can be done about that situation, especially by educating boys and girls in the difficult but highly rewarding practice of worship in expectant silence?
10. Can we combine the intuitive with the intellectual, the emotional with the rational, in our approaches to religion and to life?
11. Can we substitute a planetary perspective for our porthole view of the world, welcoming the diversity of human beings, resolving to do our utmost to create a world of decency and dignity for everyone on Spaceship Earth?
12. Can we overcome our reticence in recommending our approach to religion and to life to others? How curious and how tragic that we can urge others to use our favorite brands of soap or toothpaste, our preferences for automobiles or television sets—and yet be inhibited in recommending to them our most precious possession—our way of life?

Messengers, Message-Bearers, Interpreters

All that I have said about our message or messages are merely pious pronouncements unless they are packaged in people. As Paul said in his letter to the Philippians: "You are God's recommendations." George Fox counselled Friends to "be patterns, be examples," and later in life he declared that "The lives and conversations of Friends did preach."

Several years ago James Michener, the well-known writer, produced a short article in which he said that he travelled around the world with "a Quaker passport." Some of us have had the same experience. When people learn that we are a Quaker, they are almost always intrigued—and doors are often opened.

But one does not have to travel abroad to have that experience. In much the same way people are often identified locally as Quakers. It is curious how quickly people learn that we are Friends, and humbling to realize the expectations they frequently have of us.

In a sense, then, each of us is a sample of the Religious Society of Friends. Willingly or unwillingly, we are messengers, message-bearers, interpreters of what Quakers believe and do.

Perhaps you have sat in some meeting of the United Nations or some other international organization and listened to the interpreters. It is almost always an incredible experience. They not only translate the words; they often reproduce the tone of voice, and sometimes even the body language of the person whose talk they are interpreting.

After such an experience I often think

of our task as being God's interpreters, listening carefully and interpreting as best we can what we think God is saying to us.

Of course the opportunities to be interpreters are innumerable. They are everywhere and come to us daily—in the home or in the office, in the factory or on the farm, in the school or in the social service agency—or elsewhere.

Rabindrinath Tagore once said, "God, the Great Giver, can open the whole universe to our gaze in the narrow space of a single lane." And that final phrase can be changed to "a single street."

For me, on my street in Brooklyn, there is the eight year old lad across the way who pleads with me to let him help me water the lawn. But what he really wants is to pour out his troubles about his mother and his three consecutive step-fathers and their cruel treatment of her. There is little I can do directly about his problems, but I can be his Wailing Wall. Then there is the Haitian family next door—recent immigrants. For them I can be a personalized Good Neighbor Policy. And there is the homosexual couple down the street for whom I can be an unofficial Defense Attorney, upholding their right to their way of life, without harassment. To improve safety on our street and upgrad the neighborhood, I can support our Block Association—my little, local branch of the American Friends Service Committee.

We all have gifts and one of our most important tasks is to try to match them with the numerous needs that exist. Paul had something pertinent to say on this score when he said:

Now there are diversities of gifts but the same spirit. And there are diversities of ministrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God who worketh all things in all. But to each is given the manifestations of the Spirit . . . I Corinthians 12:4.

Sometimes as I sit in a concert hall and listen to a symphony orchestra concert, I think of how the people in a Friends Meeting resemble those musicians and their instruments. Some are violins, cellos, or bass viols. Others are piccolos, flutes, or oboes. Still others are clarinets, saxophones, and bassoons. And there are bass drums, harps, and timpani, plus other instruments. All of them are needed to produce the magnificent music of the orchestra. But behind their music lie years of practice, careful tuning, and the immediate response to the baton of the leader. (Parenthetically, I wonder which instrument you think you resemble?)

Having just completed several months on the Nominating Committee of our Meeting, I can attest to the difficulties in matching people and jobs. But I can also testify to the fact that it is a rewarding experience. It is a little like combining all the instruments into an ensemble and hoping that the orchestra players will be responsive to the baton of The Great Conductor.

And what a diversity of ministries there are in every Meeting. As the Meeting librarian, what a service it is to find the right book or booklet for the right person at the right time. As a member of the Collections Committee, what a responsibility that places on us to persuade people that generous giving is a form of ministry. And as a member of the First Day School staff, what an opportunity confronts us to help prepare a challenging program for a group of highly critical teen-agers. In a similar way one might characterize every part of the Meeting's life.

But many of the needs of a Meeting are not met by committee appointments. They are met by individuals and groups which feel a special concern. For example, we had in our Brooklyn Meeting for years a woman who devoted every Sunday after-

noon to visiting the sick, the shut-ins, and the elderly. We have now a woman who devotes much of her time and her considerable insights into human relations in a "telephone ministry." And we have a former school dietician who greatly enhances our Coffee Hour—an important function in a metropolitan area—with the cakes and cookies she loves to prepare. Are all of these ministries? In a broad sense, I would say "Yes."

Each of you can think of similar ministries in your Meeting and be thankful for those who perform them—saying so sometimes to them.

The Vocal Ministry

There is one ministry that seems to me to be sorely lacking in many (shall I say most?) of our meetings: the vocal ministry in our meetings for worship. In fact some of us are reluctant or even embarrassed to talk about it. Yet, how urgently we need men and women who can speak experientially, powerfully, and convincingly to the disillusionment and despair, the longing and seeking of our contemporaries.

Perhaps the greatest need of the Religious Society of Friends today is for a new outpouring of the spirit in the vocal ministry—in Quaker Meetings and in Friends Churches—and elsewhere.

Our ideal of the vocal ministry as Friends is an incredible one. Far from abolishing the clergy, as many non-Friends and some Friends think we have done, we have attempted to abolish the laity. In Quaker worship there is no division between pulpit and pew; we are all participants, we are all priests or ministers.

But it has always been difficult to translate that ideal into practice. Throughout more than 300 years of our history we have tried various approaches, with varying degrees of success.

Many of you know the story well; others do not. Hence it may be helpful here to recall quickly what those approaches have been.

In the early years of Quakerism there seem to me to have been four major types of ministry. One was the ministry of silence. The second was the ministry of the spoken word. The third was the ministry of daily living and the fourth of social action.

Robert Barclay described the first in the memorable passage in which he said:

... for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way to it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up . . .

I could speak at length on the power of Quaker silence as I am deeply devoted to it. Likewise I could speak on daily living and on social action. But I want to concentrate here on the second type of ministry which should arise frequently from the practice of the presence of God in the dialogue of silence.

In the early years of Quakerism the ministry of the spoken word was powerful and widespread. Most people have heard of the Valiant Sixty, public Friends who from 1654 onwards traveled widely, proclaiming the message of Christianity. Few of us are aware of the number of other ministers. In the July/-August 1983 issue of *Quaker Life*, Elfrida Vipont Foulds referred to a meeting at Beckerings Park in 1658 with from three to four thousand men and women from all over England who were there because they were all considered "gifted ministers." Imagine that! Do you suppose we could replicate that today?

When the original group of God-filled message bearers passed from the scene, Friends relied for decades primarily on people who were "recorded" for their gifts in the ministry. Many of them were apparently moving interpreters of the Word, but many were not. Consequently the vocal ministry was often woefully weak; recorded ministers and a few others gave the same or similar messages week after week—or there were often no messages for long periods.

Many of us relish the silence, but no Meeting lasts very long without some messages. And there is surely something wrong if Friends are not occasionally inspired to share something with the group

that they feel God has given them. Constantly we refer to God speaking *to* us; too seldom do we refer to God speaking *through* us.

Therefore it was in large part the failure of the vocal ministry which in the 19th century led to the rise of the pastoral system in Quakerism in the United States. This is extremely important for those of us in unprogrammed meetings to realize.

Then, in the 1920s, London Yearly Meeting decided, after years of discussion, that “recording” was in conflict with the ideal of the universal ministry. British Friends therefore ceased that practice. Soon several yearly meetings in the United States did the same.

Most people today feel that that was a wise move and that we do not want to return to the practice of recording a few people as ministers. But our current practice has its shortcomings. What is everybody’s business may become nobody’s business. Currently too few Quakers feel a special concern for the vocal ministry. Hence in many meetings we suffer from a lack of the spoken word and in other places from a surfeit of secular talks, inappropriate in a religious gathering. Too often such messages come from the front page of the Sunday newspaper, from a recent television program, or from a fleeting thought the speakers had while shaving or doing their hair that morning.

A classic example of such a state of affairs is the account of Thomas Merton’s first visit to a Friends meeting, which he recorded in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He says he was impressed by the silence, even moved by it. Then a Friend arose, whipped out a snapshot from her pocket-book, and described her recent visit to the Lion of Lucerne. It was Thomas Merton’s first—and last—visit to a Friends meeting. Eventually he became a Catholic mystic rather than a Quaker mystic.

Could that have happened in your meeting? I hope not.

Friends have long been concerned about the quality of their vocal ministry. Around the turn of the century, John Wilhelm Rowntree, that remarkable English Friend, wrote:

I think that the state of our meetings generally justifies the belief that our greatest outward need is a ministry—fearless and direct—able to deal with life in its various aspects, and presenting in fresh and modern terms, and with prophetic power, the message of Jesus [for the people] of today. (*John Wilhelm Rowntree, Essays and Addresses*, page 16)

And William Hubben wrote in the 1950s that “ministry seems to be Quakerism’s greatest problem.”

There are thousands of people today who are probably ready for the messages of Friends. They are shocked by the oppression of people in the United States and all over the world. They are terrified by the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Many are active in protest movements or are engaged in a wide variety of causes for human betterment. Some are young, others are older. Many of them realize that their lives are spiritually stunted and that they need spiritual sustenance. Quakerism will not speak to the condition of all of them, but we do have a message for many of these modern-day seekers.

What we need now more than anything else are more Friends who can articulate boldly, simply, and powerfully the universal accessibility of God and the releasing power that can come from direct contact with the Divine, transforming our lives and giving us the power to work unceasingly for the creation of God’s kingdom on earth.

To carry out such a task in the immediate future, we need not a Valiant Sixty but a Valiant Six Hundred or a Valiant Six

Thousand. Even more, we need hundreds of Friends who take seriously the importance of a vital, dynamic vocal ministry in our local meetings—people who feel called by God to speak to seekers in these troubled, perilous times.

Many years ago I picked up a forbidding-looking little book which contained the memoirs of A. Neave Brayshaw, an English Friend of the early 20th century. I read it hurriedly until I came to a passage which glowed as if it were flashing neon lights:

The expression “the gift of the ministry” may slide into an excuse for shirking if we forget that it is a gift for which search is to be made, yea, *coveted earnestly*. (*Memoir and Selected Writings*, page 85)

Then he asked the reader: “Have you ever coveted it earnestly, or is it a gift which you fervently trust will never be bestowed on you?”

That passage meant much to me then; it means much to me now. It is very possible that the vitality of the Religious Society of Friends in the foreseeable future will depend in large part on how Friends answer that question. Have *you* coveted this gift earnestly—or is it one you hope will never be bestowed on you?

Cultivating “The Gift in the Ministry”

Such a “gift of the ministry” demands commitment and courage. But it also demands preparation.

Fortunately there are some stirrings among all kinds of Friends in the United States today concerning preparation for the vocal ministry. For example, there are the efforts of Pendle Hill, of the Earlham School of Religion, and, in a different way, of Powell House and other conference centers. There is the highly commendable effort of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting through its Quaker Studies Program to deepen the spiritual life of its many participants and hence to nourish the roots of public ministry.

Ideally our local committees on ministry and oversight (or counsel) should be concerned constantly with the vocal ministry, encouraging some Friends (and discouraging others). But my impression is that such committees usually do a superior job on the oversight or counsel aspects of their work and far less well on the ministry phases. Is that true in your meeting?

But if the level of vocal ministry is to be raised in our meetings, that concern and that call must be primarily a personal one. Others can encourage us, but we must be the ones who commit ourselves to this important aspect of the Religious Society of Friends.

No one has said what I am trying to say better than John Henry Barlow, who in his leaflet *The Vocal Ministry in Our Meetings for Worship*, wrote:

I believe the time has come when some—perhaps many—must be prepared to recognize the ministry as a “first charge” upon their lives. I am not pleading for a

separate professional class. Far from it. But I am convinced that we need a fuller acknowledgement of the claims of the ministry and a more complete consecration to them.

For many that means a rededication to the public ministry in which they have been engaged for a long time. For others it means prayerful consideration of whether this is an aspect in which they want to participate wholeheartedly in the months and years ahead.

Most of the people who decide to participate should concentrate on one local Quaker group. They might also spend a few Sundays or vacation days each year visiting other meetings—or visiting a nearby meeting fairly often so that they become well acquainted with its members and attenders and are thus able to speak more directly to their needs.

In order to enrich and enlarge the lives of others, we need to enrich and enlarge our lives.

If all of us truly believe in the universal ministry, we will need to carry on some broad preparation for our periods of group worship in expectant silence. One of the curious misconceptions of many Friends is that we do not believe in preparation for our corporate worship—or indirectly, for the vocal ministry. If someone means the preparation during the week of a sermon to be delivered in the next meeting for worship, we would all agree that the answer is no. But if we mean a continuing concern for the local meeting for worship and the planting of seeds during the week that may sprout or the cultivation of plants that may blossom on Sunday, then nearly all of us would say yes.

If our times of waiting upon the Lord together are the core of our existence, then everything we do during the week is germane to that special time on Sundays. And we need to prepare for it in a variety of

ways—by our daily or intermittent devotions, by our visits with members and attenders, and by our reading of the Bible, the great devotional classics, and other materials. For some it means keeping a personal journal; for others, compiling their own collection of favorite quotations or the frequent use of such printed compilations.

It may even mean that a message will come to us during the week, for God certainly speaks to human beings other than between 11 and 12 o'clock on Sundays. If so, those thoughts should be taken to the meeting for worship and tested in the silence to see if they are really God's messages.

Writing of such background preparation, Bliss Forbush once said in a little leaflet, *The Spoken Word*:

Rufus Jones was always a welcomed visitor in any meeting because his mind was stored with a wealth of observations and ideas, the result of wide reading and meditation. The wells of the spirit can be kept filled by extensive reading of the best things [people] have thought and done. The results of personal observation and experience always come with a freshness which gives validity to what we say. Jesus drew lessons from nature and from home and village life; Paul, from the arena, foot races, and gladiator combats.

And those of us who have been privileged to know Bliss Forbush will agree that his passage about Rufus Jones applies as well to Bliss.

What carpenter would think of going into his workshop without tools and materials with which to work? What individuals would attempt to light a fire without kindling and matches? What cook would think of trying to prepare a meal without the proper ingredients for it? What artist would undertake to produce a painting without paper or a canvas, and paints. Preposterous, you say. But so often we

come to our Meetings for Worship with little or no preparation.

What kinds of messages are needed in our meetings? Of course we must rely on our leadings in worship. But there are some themes we should probably bear in mind as we pray for ourselves and for our fellow worshippers.

Many of us need more adoration in our meetings for worship: "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!" (Ps. 8:1).

Many of us need messages of hope and of encouragement as we face difficulties in carrying out our visions of what life ought to be.

Many of us need affirmations of faith and the assurance of the Presence of God in times of testing, especially from people who have lived through trials and tribulations—and triumphed.

Many of us need the assurance that we can grow through grief—a message Elizabeth Vining, Elizabeth Watson, and others have expressed so vividly and sympathetically, saying that we seldom overcome grief but that we can learn to live with it.

Many of us need messages of reaffirmation, renewal, and rededication. "I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." Many of us need to be counseled to find times for meditation and prayer in our busy lives, lest we outrun our leadings.

Many of us need to be reminded of John Woolman's advice "to turn all we possess into the channel of universal love," for we tend to try to water the deserts around us with sponges rather than with irrigation canals.

Many of us need words of joy and exultation. In a compelling statement Tom Kelly once said:

I'd rather be jolly St. Francis hymning his canticle to the sun than a dour old sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have

been spiritual persimmons. (*Testament of Devotion*, page 92)

And many of us need more messages in prayer in our meetings. Such vocal outpourings are too often the casualties of contemporary Quakerism. As E. Herman once wrote, "We suffer from arrested development in prayer." We have many messages in meeting about prayer, but few vocal prayers. Howard Brinton reminded us frequently that "prayer is the highest vocal exercise in a meeting for worship"; Helen Hole called vocal prayer "the cornerstone."

We do, indeed, have a message for these troubled times—in fact, a whole cluster of them: mighty messages, moving messages, life-sustaining messages, life-transforming messages, and sometimes life-disturbing messages.

We need to live them and to proclaim them. We are relatively good at practicing what we preach; perhaps we need to learn to preach what we practice. What Quakerism needs at this important juncture of history is hundreds and thousands of messengers, message-bearers and interpreters.

I hope you feel that God is tapping you on the shoulder and saying quietly but persuasively: You are the one.

Some Questions for Discussion

Relating to Your Local Meeting

1. What three wishes do you have for your Meeting in the months ahead? Why?
2. Which of the eight words or phrases describing the heart of Quakerism are most satisfying to you? Why? Are there others you would suggest?
3. On which of the 12 points mentioned on page 10 does your Meeting have the most difficulty? What might you do about that situation?
4. What opportunities have you personally had—or has your Meeting had in recent months—to apply your beliefs on your job and/or in the community?
5. How helpful is the vocal ministry in your Meeting? On what aspects of Christian living do you wish there were more messages?
6. What kinds of “preparation” for worship does your Meeting foster (such as hymn singing occasionally before Meeting for Worship, a group reading devotional literature, reading of the Queries and/or Advices or parts of the Bible early in the Meeting?) What is your reaction to such practices? Why?

Relating to the Wider Religious Society of Friends

1. What are your three wishes for the Religious Society of Friends for the foreseeable future? Why?
2. How do you react to the quotation from Kenneth Boulding on “the evolutionary potential” of Friends?
3. What is your reaction to the word “evangelical?” Why? What word or phrase would be more acceptable to you?
4. How do you react to the author’s Invitation to Inquirers, on pages 8 and 9? How would you edit or change it? Why?
5. On which two or three points listed as questions on page 10 do you feel we as Quakers are weakest today? What recommendations would you make for improvement on these issues?
6. How do you react to the author’s contention that the single most important lack of the Religious Society of Friends today nation-wide is a lack of a vital vocal ministry? If that is true, what role could you play in rectifying that situation?