

# The Crucial Role of <sup>the</sup> Spoken Ministry

by Leonard S. Kenworthy

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.

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. 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?

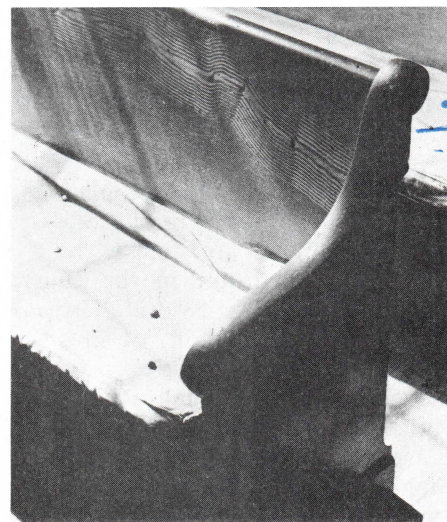
When the original group of God-filled message-bearers passed from the scene, Friends relied for decades primarily on people who were "recorded" for their gifts in the ministry. Many of them were apparently moving interpreters of the Word, but many were not. Consequently the vocal ministry was often woefully 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.

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 Mer-



Peter Stellenheim

What we need now more than anything else are more Friends who can articulate boldly, simply, and powerfully the universal accessibility of God.

ton'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 pocketbook, 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)

*This article is excerpted from Leonard S. Kenworthy's address, "Our Messages: Our Message-Bearers" given on July 3 at the Friends General Conference gathering. Retired at Kendal (Pa.), he runs the Quaker Press at Kennett Square, Pa. His recent books and pamphlets include Quakerism: A Study Guide to the Religious Society of Friends, Quaker Quotations on Faith and Practice, Meditations Around the U.S.A., and Living in the Light: Some Quaker Pioneers of the 20th Century, Volume 1. Friend Leonard attends meeting at Kendal. He is an active member of the JOURNAL's board of managers.*

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. Do *you* covet this gift earnestly—or is it one you hope will never be bestowed on you?

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.

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

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 M. 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 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 worshipers.

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 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 are 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. □

We are relatively good at practicing what we preach; perhaps we need to learn to preach what we practice.

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