**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 loving Spirit guiding us to live justly and peaceably; this Spirit is available to all.

Friends use many terms to refer to this inward spiritual reality. A few of these are Spirit, the Inward Light, Christ, the Divine, the Seed, Truth, and that of God in everyone. Ultimately this spiritual reality is beyond words. When Friends encounter names for the Divine that do not speak to their condition, they are encouraged to receive them with an open heart.

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](http://www.innerlightbooks.com/books/files/OurLifeIsLove-excerpt.pdf))

Today, within BYM, a wide range of theologies are represented. The fourth paragraph of the BYM 1964 Statement on Spiritual Unity which addressed the 1828 division in BYM (see page 5 for the context), suggests an answer to what unites us as Quakers:

*We all acknowledge the guidance of the Inner Light—the Christ Within—God’s direct, 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. All the Meetings for Worship of our Monthly Meetings aspire to openness to God’s communication directly with every person. Worship is primarily on the basis of expectant waiting upon the Spirit, a communion with God 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.*

Quakers wait in expectant silence to hear the voice of God. Whether in the silences between spoken messages in Meeting for Worship, in study, in meditation, in prayer, we practice patient attention to the spiritual ground around us. Often, by listening attentively, we are able to hear the Spirit in the authentic words of others.

*Simple, respectful, prayerful listening is at least as good for the soul of the listener as for the person listened to.* (Pat Loring, 1997)

The Quaker experience can be challenging as we try to discern the Light in ourselves and in our interactions with the secular world, which may include work for justice, equity, peace, care for the earth, and the well-being of all. We often struggle as we work to deepen or re-deepen our faith and seek to love one another. When we open ourselves to the Spirit, especially as we struggle, 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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRO-lGD9emM))

**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](https://books.google.com/books/download/Quaker_Strongholds.pdf?id=Sb7W_AhpJR4C&output=pdf))

**A.** **Introduction**

Meeting for Worship is the heart of every Friends meeting, usually held on First Day (Sunday). In addition, many Friends make time for daily worship and reflection. Major life events, such as Quaker marriages and memorial services, are based in worship, as are our monthly meetings for business and committee meetings. Sometimes, Friends ask a small group to worship with them for personal healing. Friends may also organize worship as part of public witness. Our youth develop their faith and find their voices as they worship in monthly meetings, Quaker camps, schools, and youth programs.

**b. Quaker worship**

*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](https://ia801309.us.archive.org/34/items/journalofgeorgef00foxg/journalofgeorgef00foxg.pdf))

Friends have a living, growing faith. Over centuries, Quaker worship has evolved. Many Quakers in the world today, including some in BYM, practice a primarily vocal form of worship, facilitated by designated ministers. These worship services may include exuberance, Bible verses, hymns, praise singing, prepared and spontaneous messages, and a planned movement through the time together. Most Friends meetings within BYM practice waiting worship grounded in silence which is described in detail below. In all forms of Quaker worship, Friends transcend self and together enter into unity with the Spirit.

Early Friends trusted that the guidance of the Inward Teacher could be discerned directly and that Truth continues to be revealed. In worship, we enter into stillness in order to feel the 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.

Reaching this place of stillness is sometimes referred to as “centering.” Some people center by focusing on their breathing; some by remembering a poem or song or prayer; some by silently welcoming each person in the room, surrounding them with love and light; and, some Friends directly enter the silence and center. Centering allows us to join together in worship, opening our hearts to the Divine.

*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](https://quakerinfo.org/quakerism/worship))

Quaker worship is a communal process. It is more deeply grounded when Friends come prepared for worship by staying in touch with Spirit throughout the week with daily prayers, spiritual readings, and seeking to connect with that of God in each person with whom they interact in work, school, family, and community.

*We expect to encounter God in our lives, in our worship, in our work, in our lives together.* ([Carl Magruder, 2021](https://www.bym-rsf.org/publications/speakers.html))

**c.** **Vocal ministry**

Sometimes during worship, the Spirit leads one or more Friends to speak out of the silence. Vocal ministry arises from a leading, a persistent sense that one is being compelled to rise and allow the Spirit to speak through us.

Before speaking, Friends go through a process of discernment: Is this a message for me? Is this a message to be shared privately with others? Is this a message from Spirit to be shared with all present? Sometimes a message is not yet ripe, or comes clearly but is meant only for the person receiving it, not for the group.

*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 my message much better than I could ever have given it.* ([Shirley Dodson, 1980](https://www.friendsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/emember/downloads/1980/HC12-50687.pdf))

Some Friends are led to speak frequently, and others only rarely; yet the message of a whispering child, a gurgling baby, or an adult who seldom speaks may be as moving and helpful as that of a person more practiced in ministry. Visitors and newcomers, who may be less familiar with Quakers, can also offer powerful messages.

Friends do not come to meeting prepared to speak or not to speak. If physically able, Friends stand to share messages; they are encouraged to speak clearly and loudly enough so all can hear, with as few words as possible but as many as necessary. Typically, Friends speak only once. If afterwards a message feels incomplete, perhaps the rest of the message is meant to be shared by another. Friends who do not speak aloud uphold the meeting by their worshipful presence. Even if not a word is spoken, the meeting for worship can be profoundly nurturing.

In Meeting for Worship, we open our hearts so the 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 rest of the natural world; we can experience repentance, forgiveness, and guidance. During worship, the Light may reveal impediments to giving and receiving healing and love. Worship can renew and strengthen us to return to the world with inspired vision and commitment to live faithfully.

It is wondrous when Friends experience what is called a “gathered meeting,” when participants 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 worshipers. 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 R. Kelly, 1944](https://tractassociation.org/digital-material/meeting-for-worship/the-gathered-meeting/))

**d. Challenges**

Even when Friends experience spiritual emptiness, their presence adds to the community and completes it. Journals and writings of past Friends describe long periods of spiritual dryness, when Spirit seemed distant or even absent. Continued participation in worship and in the life of the Meeting can ease the feeling of disconnection from the Divine presence. Over time, a renewed and deepened sense of spiritual grounding may occur.

*Open unto me — light for my darkness.*

*Open unto me — courage for my fear.*

*Open unto me — hope for my despair.*

*Open unto me — peace for my turmoil.*

*Open unto me — joy for my sorrow.*

*Open unto me — strength for my weakness.*

*Open unto me — wisdom for my confusion.*

*Open unto me — forgiveness for my sins.*

*Open unto me — tenderness for my toughness.*

*Open unto me — love for my hates.*

*Open unto me — thy Self for my self.*

*Lord, Lord, open unto me!*

([Howard Thurman, 1953](https://archive.org/details/meditationsofhea0000thur/page/188/mode/1up))

Sometimes there can be disruptions to the flow of worship. Friends may experience a particular message as jarring or challenging, yet the words shared may ultimately deepen the worship experience. A message may be given that doesn't speak to your condition. Let it go; it may be meant for someone else.

If the nature or frequency of messages becomes harmful to the health of a meeting community, the committee in your meeting responsible for worship is tasked with responding. The BYM Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee is also a potential resource. With effort and reliance on the Divine, Friends trust the meeting community can be healed and even grow stronger.

*True worship is a living experience. By and through it we enter into a life so vital, so vivid, so large and glorious that, by comparison, our life of ordinary activities seems narrow, dull, dead. By bodily action the body comes alive. By mental action the mind comes alive. So by spiritual action the spirit comes alive. Worship is spiritual action. By means of it our spirits awake, mature, and grow up to God.* ([Jean Toomer, 1947](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/24576/24576-h/24576-h.htm))