

2022

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Recommended Citation

Daniels, C. Wess (2022) "Revolutionary Faithfulness: Quaker Pastoral Practice and Theology in an Age of Empire," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 136, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol136/iss1/4>

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REVOLUTIONARY FAITHFULNESS: QUAKER PASTORAL PRACTICE AND THEOLOGY IN AN AGE OF EMPIRE

C. WESS DANIELS

I am glad there is space for what I expect will be a rigorous and critical examination of Quaker pastoral theology within the pages of *Quaker Religious Thought*. This is needed as much now as ever. For a practice that goes back to at least the late 1860s (Barbour and Frost, 1994: 211), it is unclear why so little has been written about it in 160 years.¹ This is not just a lost opportunity; it is a grave deficit for programmed Friends. It could be argued that many of the challenges Gurneyite Quakerism faces today—in terms of tradition drift, division, and, at least in the US, shrinking congregations—are the results of Friends not apprenticing people into the practice of Quaker pastoring.

I want to start by accepting that those early pastoral Friends were faithful to leadings of the Holy Spirit. I am not interested in rehashing that history or making an apology for it. Instead, I set out to envision a Quaker pastoral practice and theology in a time of empire. One that takes seriously the current context within a global information culture and what the Poor People's Campaign calls the five interlocking evils of systemic racism: poverty, the war economy, climate devastation, and the distorted moral narrative of Christian nationalism (Anderson, S., Bayard, M., Bennis, P., et. al: *Souls of Poor Folks*: 2018).

Apprentices Are Self-Aware of the Tradition

To develop the “what” of this vision, let us begin with the “how” to get there. A person called to serve their meeting as a released minister must see themselves first being inducted into the Quaker tradition as one of its apprentices; subordinate to the embodied community that now makes up that tradition as well

as its rationality, narratives, convictions, virtues and practices (cf. Daniels: 2015, 102–105).

According to Alasdair MacIntyre apprentices are those who become “aware of [their tradition] and of its direction and in a self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debate and carry its enquiries forward” (MacIntyre 1988: 326). As apprentices, Quaker pastors see the practice of pastoring as a craft within the tradition by which they are formed, study, and take responsibility for the overall development and well-being of this aspect of the tradition.

In this way a Quaker pastor is someone who shares in the “contingencies of its history, understanding its story as one’s own, and finding a place for oneself as a character in the enacted dramatic narrative which is that story so far” (MacIntyre 2012:65).

Renewal and remixing of the Quaker tradition, or any tradition for that matter, happens not at the whim of any person, but through the faithfulness of the practitioners and apprentices who are devoted to the ongoing revitalization of their tradition. They are those who in a self-aware way seek to carry their tradition forward through the maze of modern challenges and conflicts. Quaker pastors must undergo this kind of relationship to Quakerism if they wish to “link past and future...and draw upon [the] tradition, to interpret and reinterpret it...” (Ibid: 66). This is critical to the development of pastoral theology and practice within the Quaker tradition; one must be self-aware enough to see one is a part of the present and historical community, accept its authority, and proceed accordingly. Therefore, one accepts that there is no “pastor” as such, but only pastor-apprenticed-to-a-tradition, a pastor who is located within this present context and community carrying that tradition and its teachings forward. The following are three characteristics that point to the uniqueness and usefulness of the Quaker pastor in our current context.

Envisioning a Quaker PASTORAL Theology Today

The Quaker Pastor Apprentices Others to the Quaker Tradition

Having undergone the process of becoming an apprentice, the Quaker pastor makes opportunities for more apprentices within the congregation.

This not only develops strong leadership with the community but allows for deeper participation in the spiritual life of the congregation. This broadening of participants-in-the-tradition gives support for the needed remix and renewal necessary to adapt in these challenging times: it is one of the ways Quakerism remains an open work (Daniels 2015:115–116). By teaching Quaker theology and practice as a craft to be learned and extended, more robust, vibrant, and resilient communities can emerge.

The role of pastor as apprentice and teacher is nothing new. This is the original reason given for the creation of the pastoral system. The rise of pastors within the Quaker tradition was, according to Barbour and Frost (1994: 211), not due to a particular “Evangelical” theology but to “late fruits of the revivals.” The need arose out of a “hunger [that] was felt by those who joined meetings after revivals, with no previous Quaker background, for whom Quaker elders felt the need for a teaching program” (Ibid.). The Gurneyite tradition innovated on itself by allowing a system to emerge within its communities that would care for the great influx of members starting in 1867 (Ibid.). This original vision for the released Quaker minister was to apprentice a new generation of Quakers into the tradition, and that need has not changed, even if—and especially because—many programmed yearly meetings today tend to put more focus on Evangelical theology rather than formation within the Quaker tradition.

It could be argued that Friends in the generations leading up to the pastoral innovation largely came out of birthright culture. Birthright culture is a culture that is primarily family-based and concerned with preservation and legacy. What is passed down in birthright culture is done so only implicitly and through

inheritance of those identified as (worthy) insiders. Birthright culture is not directly exclusive to newcomers but often maintains internal barriers that keep newcomers from gaining any real mastery. This view is encapsulated by the saying, “Quakerism can only be caught, not taught.”

Apprenticeship is a response to birthright culture. The shift towards pastoral work opened up the possibility of a return to conviction culture similar to what was witnessed in the first generation of Friends. Conviction culture leans towards an open-ended model of change, is open to the outsider, and passes on its teachings and practices explicitly through apprenticeship. Conviction culture is open to change and remix because it moves towards an internalization of the tradition for any who wish to participate, rather than through familial ties and other externalized identity markers.

Quaker Pastors Practice Participatory Leadership

There is no reason why Friends should not think that God gave the pastoral stream to Gurneyite Quakers. Rather than seeing pastors as a betrayal of Quaker theology, it is a remix. It is an evolution of a tradition when faced with new challenges and contexts. It has the contours of a “faithful betrayal,” faithfulness to the tradition that is not “read-only,” but is instead “read-write” (Daniels 2010: 28). While it is not meant to be a wholesale adoption of the Methodist or Nazarene traditions, concept-borrowing and translation from other traditions to overcome crisis is not unusual (Daniels 2015:36–39. cf. MacIntyre 1988: 166–167; 361ff). Instead, it is the practice of pastoring that undergoes remix within the new context of the highly participative Quaker tradition.

Recast and reinterpreted, the Quaker-as-pastor practices pastoring differently. For instance, a pastor working within “the liturgy of silence” as their main context is going to act and live and practice faith in a very different way from other liturgical contexts (Dandelion 2005). Participation in the listening community grounds their work and out of that context a new look on pastoring arises. If the headship of Christ and the liturgy of silence are central frames of reference everything shifts. This is grounds for a

far more participatory pastoral theology than that of one rooted in a high liturgy or vastly different ecclesiology.

A Quaker pastor committed to the original Quaker vision and working out of the context of a liturgy of silence cannot and would not seek to become God's intermediary, misidentifying with and taking on Jesus' role as the head of the church. In fact, the early Quaker conviction that "Christ is come to teach the people himself" is as much an anti-Christendom, anti-religion of empire claim, as it is a defining characteristic of how the Quaker community organizes itself ecclesiologically. A Quaker pastor's main goal is to support the creation of a participatory space that allows Christ to lead the meeting. In turn this practice—making space for the leadership of Christ—will lead the congregation, as the Quaker tradition has demonstrated over the past 350 years, in resistance to Christendom and other forms of the religion of empire.

Quaker Pastors Practice "Revolutionary Faithfulness"

This kind of participatory theology leads to and nurtures the congregation to see themselves as co-laborers with Christ in the unfolding liberation of the world, or what R.W. Tucker names, "revolutionary faithfulness." A faithfulness shaped by the Quaker tradition leads to liberation over against wealth, power, comfort, and the secularization of values (Tucker 1967). In the same way that early Quakers were a disruption to Christendom in the 17th century, and Quaker pastors were a disruption to Quaker practice that had become focused on comfortability, fascination with silence, and birthright culture in the 19th century, Quaker pastors today can be a disruptive force for Friends tempted to become too comfortable, insular, and unaware of suffering in the face of the five interlocking evils.

The original Quaker message is a message against the religion of empire, a prophetic message and practice that seeks to recover the *Jesus of the Disinherited* and stand with those whose backs are against the wall in the present moment (Thurman 1996). Following this, the early Quaker movement can be seen as a kind of poor people's campaign, led by the empowered poor and dispossessed, organized around a liberatory message that the Jesus

who came to release the captives and bring good news to the poor was now present and leading Friends. This is the message that resonated with religious dissenters, poor folks, and those who had grown weary of the political hypocrisy of Christendom. It is not a coincidence that Quakerism began in the poorer Northern part of England and was led in part by a man who was uneducated and from a working class family (who partnered—and co-founded the movement—with a wealthy benefactor in Margaret Fell who was able to help support and provide coverage for the movement).

What does it mean then for Quaker pastors to recover this kind of movement for Quaker communities living today in an age of empire? What does it mean to be faithful to the liberatory message of Jesus in the context of the U.S. which is made up of: “Nearly 41 million Americans liv[ing] below the federal poverty line and 140 million people (43.5 percent) are either poor or low-income” (Anderson, S., Bayard, M., et al: 2018)?

Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of people have died from COVID-19 and suffer its economic consequences; and, our society faces perpetual war and police brutality, ecological collapse and an insurgent violent white Christian nationalism. The Quaker pastor in this context can reinvigorate the revolutionary message of Friends, nurturing communities to stand with the poor and dispossessed and resist these interlocking evils of empire.

The Quaker pastor can be a harbinger of revolutionary faithfulness within their meeting and yearly meetings. Rather than becoming part of the comfortable “birthright culture,” they are to help disrupt that which lulls Quaker communities to sleep and leads them into ignorance when it comes to the suffering of others. Instead, they relink their communities to the revolutionary message of Friends who saw themselves as inheritors of the revolutionary message of Jesus. In doing so, Quaker pastors today connect their communities to an empathetic and participatory reading of Jesus, the poor brown-skinned Palestinian Jew, living under Roman occupation in the first century who continues to lead his people in resistance to empire. Undoubtedly then, Quaker communities will once again see themselves within the ongoing story of God’s liberation of and through the poor and oppressed.

Endnotes

- 1 The only article I could find remotely related to this topic was Trueblood's, "The Paradox of the Quaker Ministry," from D. Elton Trueblood (Trueblood: 1962).

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