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THE CONFLICT IS INHERENT: A QUAKER THEOLOGY OF VOCATIONAL MINISTRY

ROBIN MOHR

“I’m wrestling with the nagging feeling that God is calling me to this ministry of hospitality and encouragement: this work of bringing Friends together, convening learning communities, facilitating conversations and supporting Friends on their spiritual journeys, which brings me such joy and fulfillment and peace. Aren’t I really supposed to be doing this all the time? Am I disobeying God’s leading by spending so much of my time earning a secular living? Or is the desire to devote myself to a full-time, ‘hireling’ ministry a distraction? A temptation?”²¹

This tension is familiar to many Quakers who are seeking to live a faithful life: the abundance of joy that arises in service to Friends leads to the desire to devote oneself entirely to service to Friends. In fact, this apparent conflict, or dialectic, or perhaps contradiction, is inherent in a Quaker understanding of vocational ministry. It’s not a bug, it’s a feature. There are three aspects of Quaker vocational ministry that illustrate this; three dyads that may appear to the casual observer as in conflict. On closer inspection, from the perspective of a practitioner, they do not have to be contradictory. The first dyad is the contest between paid and volunteer ministry. Second is the perceived conflict between being a mother² and a minister. Third is the tension between being a prophet and being an administrator.

PAID VS. VOLUNTEER MINISTRY?

“Actually, I think I am given both pieces of work to do. Just as God has called me to be a Quaker and not a Presbyterian, God is showing me what the Quaker path of ministry looks like. I have a ‘competency’ as Friends have

traditionally called it, and I am figuring out how to balance my household chores/family responsibilities, my paid employment and my religious vocation.”³

I wrote this blogpost after leading a workshop at the Ben Lomond Quaker Center on *Primitive Quakerism in a Postmodern World* with C. Wess Daniels and Martin Kelly in March 2009. The weekend went very well. The hardest part for me was the week after. Because I wanted so desperately to do more of it.

In March of 2011, I got the chance to work full-time for an international Quaker institution.⁴ For ten years now, I have been paid a living wage to run a small non-profit organization, facilitate Quaker workshops, and minister to the condition of Friends. As an employee of a Quaker institution, I have been released to do the work that somebody has to do. Organizational administration is my tent-making⁵ work while I tend to the spiritual side of the Quaker community. It is often more efficient for this work to be done by competent, trained people who are able to focus and follow through. A Quaker employee’s function is also to help other people to develop their own spiritual gifts, not to enable the gifts of the community to atrophy.

Being an employee of a Quaker institution is much like being one of the teachers at my children’s cooperative preschool. Parents served on the board of directors, who hired the director of the school, who then hired the lead teachers. Those teachers in turn told us—the parents—what to do to teach our children, because they had both more training and more experience than the parents. We parents submitted to their authority in the classroom and they submitted to ours as to other aspects of running the school, and it was mostly a healthy relationship.

MOTHER VS. MINISTER?

“Apparently I am not called to singleness of eye or singleness of purpose. It wouldn’t make me happy to be a full-time writer/minister and watch my children go around with holes in their shoes. It wouldn’t make me happy to have a million dollar job that required me to work on Sundays or past my children’s bedtimes. And it wouldn’t make me happy to have a spotless house but no reason to ever leave it.”⁶

I am blessed to be able to carry out my spiritual calling in my full-time employment. I am also blessed by the opportunity to use so many of the gifts and experiences I have accumulated over the years. It is important to me that I can be both a mother and a minister, and that our Quaker theology and the Quaker embodiment of vocational ministry can encompass both.

I have learned a number of spiritual skills for ministry from my parenting journey: patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and generosity. Early on in my parenting journey, I learned that I would have to do everything in short snatches of time. I slept in short snatches; I ate in short snatches; I talked to people in short snatches, and I prayed in short snatches. I learned how to begin again, an important prayer practice that I learned from motherhood, over and over again.

Even so, I am sometimes resentful of the blessings in my life. There is, and always will be, a conflict between competing priorities and limited hours in the day. Even in this pandemic era of working from home, I can’t be mentally “at home” and “at work” at the same time. We are all balancing our need for paid work and rest and love and homemaking.

For a human being, the pursuit of vocation cannot be separated from the rest of life. All humans have more to offer than any single role that our society may cast them in. We live in human communities so that no one has to do all the work. Even a person with a “full-time” job is not entitled to do only one thing. An attention to solely intellectual pursuits is not healthy, neither is a

solely care-giving or emotional role, or a solely physical occupation. These all are carried out in late modernity by people who also have responsibilities to their families and to their communities. The ideal of a solitary pursuit is unhealthy for the human condition. Those who have been celebrated for their sole dedication to one thing have too often been quietly engaged in other self-soothing activities, whether that involved alcohol or drugs or other people's wives.

What does "full-time" even mean for a mother, an artist, or a prophet?

PROPHET VS. ADMINISTRATOR?

"When Quakers are hiring, we look for prophets, and then we make them administrators."⁷

In many ways, our theology of vocational ministry encompasses both aspects. Essential to Quaker practice is the nurture and development of the holy skills of discernment, truth-telling, and obedience. Vocational ministry is the active practice of these (and other) skills, whether in full-time employment by Quaker institutions or not. Quaker institutions have as part of their mandate: formation in the vocation of being the Quakers the world needs. An employee of a Quaker institution is a servant to carry out the will of the Meeting (or association of meetings) and a facilitator of groups of other Friends in that service. In short, one measure of the success of a Quaker employee is the liberation of gifts to carry out that will, not their suppression.

Being the lead employee of a Quaker institution is also like being a taxi driver. I have a responsibility to understand and clarify where the passengers want to go, to be sure there is gas in the tank and the repairs are done, some latitude to figure out the best route to get there, and then to make moment by moment course corrections, using my best judgment and informing the owners and the passengers as needed. In this role, I share what I see and know, from my training and experience with Friends in different places.

In my Bible, I keep a small hand-drawn card given to me by a young Bolivian woman. It says, “*Gracias Robin, porque tu vida me sorprende.*” (Thank you Robin, because your life surprises me.) She gave it to me at the end of an FWCC conference where she was one of my roommates. I keep it to remind me that people are watching. If my life surprises her, what new things will she consider as within her reach? How am I modeling the egalitarian model of Quaker ministry? How am I living a life of faithfulness, of integrity and audacity that would be worthy of her notice, a surprise in a good way? This affects how I am both an administrator and a prophetic voice in turn.

CONCLUSION

“Anyway, this is why I’m writing this here today: I want to record publicly that I too am struggling with this issue. I know I am not alone. And I know this struggle is not because of a mistake, or a failure to live out my calling. It is part of the challenge of living as a Quaker in the 21st century.”⁸

A Quaker theology of vocational ministry must include this multi-faceted reality. As someone who has spent ten years as a paid employee of a Quaker institution, and twenty years before that as an unpaid minister of the Gospel, I can say that there is no one who is undivided in their attention. God calls us to live fully. This is the theology of Quaker vocational ministry.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Mohr, Robin. “Can I do it again? Pleeease?”, *What Canst Thou Say?*, <http://robinmsf.blogspot.com/2009/03/>, accessed 12/11/2020
- 2 In this paper I will use the term “mother,” but the reader should understand that I mean any parent or caregiver.
- 3 Mohr, 2009.
- 4 My employer is the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas (FWCC) which is the association of Quaker yearly meetings across all the branches of Friends from Alaska to Bolivia. This paper represents my personal opinions rather than any official positions of the Friends World Committee.
- 5 Acts 18:3
- 6 Mohr, 2009.
- 7 Mohr, Robin, speaking on a panel Servant Style Leadership within Organizations, at Earlham School of Religion Leadership Conference, 2014. <https://esr.earlham.edu/news-events/events/leadership2014>
- 8 Mohr, 2009.