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A DANGEROUS THEOLOGY

EMILY PROVANCE

Ministry is inherently risky. The existence of a call to ministry implies potential failure: failure to respond, failure to discern, failure to fulfill. Ministry also carries with it potential societal and personal consequences, ranging from outright persecution to subtler judgment for counter-cultural words and actions to loss or rearrangement of personal relationships.

Perhaps for this reason, within the Quaker context, we can't address a theology of ministry while only addressing the minister. Quakerism is not a faith of the individual but of the community. In theological and theoretical circles, Friends say that the community, not the individual, has the responsibility for empowering ministry. The individual may be called, but the community must respond faithfully.

What does this mean? Consider first the simplest of circumstances: one individual is called to give vocal ministry one time in the context of expectant worship. What role does the community play in making this ministry possible? The community is deeply centered in worship, which makes the rising up of vocal ministry more likely; the community has taught the individual how to recognize and discern a call to vocal ministry; the community has created an environment in which the individual knows that, if the ministry is given imperfectly, the minister will not be ridiculed but, instead, appropriately supported and guided; the community has demonstrated its willingness to listen to and respond to well-led ministry, even when it's challenging; the community may pray silently for the minister who is standing and speaking; and the community has provided the necessary physical support, such as a microphone and sound system. All of this empowers ministry, making more possible any individual's faithful response to a call.

But when we are speaking of vocational ministry, the role of the community necessarily grows more complicated. "Vocational ministry" is either continuous or recurring, consuming a significant

portion of the time and energy of the minister. In the case of vocational ministry, much more is needed to make the ministry possible. The community still must educate about ministry, refrain from ridicule, support and encourage and guide the minister, accept the fruits of the ministry, and provide appropriate physical and spiritual support. But “appropriate physical and spiritual support,” in this instance, would likely include clearness committees, travel minutes, recording, logistical assistance, financial support, prayer, spiritual guidance, emotional support, and help with family obligations. Suddenly, the empowering of ministry is a considerably larger task.

The community is responsible for empowering ministry. In the context of a covenant community this makes sense, because ultimately, of course, it is God who empowers ministry, but God generally does this not by invisible miracle but by way of placing the minister within a community, which faithfully fulfills the charge.

This is a dangerous theology.

It is dangerous because ministry is inherently risky, and when Friends say to a minister, “The community is responsible for empowering ministry,” it can cause an individual to commit to the risk, believing that the community will be present to play its role, and often, *the community is not there*.

It’s obvious how this can damage the minister, but it also damages communities. It is inevitably damaging to the community because the community is failing to fulfil an expectation that it often did not know existed and that members of the community have never agreed to. Yes, in theological and theoretical circles, we often say that the community is responsible for empowering ministry. But among Friends generally, many have never even heard of this concept, and some of those who have heard of it have rejected it explicitly.

Can Friends continue to claim that this is our theology? If theology among Friends is discovered through a process of corporate discernment, and if many of the Friends alive today are

not in unity with this idea (that the community is responsible for empowering ministry), then at what point must we admit that this is no longer the sense of the meeting? It's certainly true that, historically, this has been our theology, and tradition is the contribution of our ancestors to contemporary corporate discernment. Still, it's difficult to argue that any theology is still our collective theology when the majority of Friends have never heard of it and when some who have, have rejected it.

In the twenty-first century, Friends also must question whether such a theology is a reasonable expectation of our communities. Our spiritual ancestors lived in communities that were mostly self-contained. Partly because Friends were not accepted in mainstream society, Friends tended to live close together, eat food from one another's farms, send their children to school together, patronize one another's businesses, socialize with one another, and marry each other.

Today, we have non-Quaker neighbors; our children attend school with non-Quakers; we obtain our food and other goods from non-Quakers; we marry non-Quakers; we work for non-Quakers; we have non-Quaker social obligations. Without judging whether this is a positive or a negative change, it certainly *is* a change, and we all have obligations to our non-Quaker human connections. We may see the Friends in our meetings for no more than ninety minutes each week. Under those conditions, is it reasonable to expect that we will manage to fulfill all of our obligations to our non-Quaker connections and still have sufficient time, energy, and financial resources to take full responsibility for empowering ministry within our Quaker communities?

I don't believe we have a Quaker theology of vocational ministry. I do not believe we have done the necessary work of discernment within our communities to know what such a theology, today, would be.

Friends do continue to be called to vocational ministry. From time to time, a Friend comes to me who is experiencing such a call and asks for my advice, as someone who's living it. Here's what I say:

You will experience extraordinary support and faithfulness from your community, and particularly, from certain individual Friends. You'll have much for which to be grateful. But the community will not take responsibility for ensuring that your needs are met. You must do so, and doing so is part of the ministry. You must learn to, first, discern what you need; second, ask for what you need; and thirdly, accept support when it's given. You must also learn to recognize the moments when the community is not able to give you what you need, and you will have to find another way. Obtaining the necessary emotional, spiritual, physical, and financial support for the ministry is not something you must do in addition to the ministry. It is part of the ministry. Learn to think of it this way.

I wish that most Quaker communities were ready to discern a theology of ministry, but in my experience, this is not where we are. Instead, we're in a place of needing to discern what it means, more generally, to be a thriving, twenty-first century covenant community. Nearly every Quaker community I know is entangled and bound in the dominant culture and "we've always done it this way," but faithfulness is risky, and the work before us is learning to be faithful communities. After that, a theology of ministry will come.