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# ONE QUAKER'S LIFE IN THE MINISTRY

LLOYD LEE WILSON

I am an apprentice to the Quaker faith tradition. I am a recorded minister, speaking under the authority of a minute issued by Friendship Friends Monthly Meeting, and with the specific release of my anchor committee in that meeting.

Wil Cooper said that we Quakers tell so many stories about ourselves because, without creeds or dogma, stories are how we remember who we are as a people of faith. I am not able to articulate an adequate Quaker theology of vocational ministry; I can tell you some stories from a lifetime of wrestling over an adequate response to God's call to holy surrender.

I've learned three lessons from events in these stories: God's call to individuals is persistent and perceptible; the call is to a life of surrender, not to a particular mission; and one's vocation in ministry is meant to be lived out in the threefold relationship of individual, God, and the faith community.

## GOD'S PERSISTENT, PERCEPTIBLE CALL

Jacob wrestled with the angel for a night; I have wrestled with God over the call to ministry all my life. When I was seven years old, my grandmother laid hands on me and prophesied I would be a minister, my little brother a doctor. At 12 I stomped into the kitchen, slammed my hand down on the kitchen table, declared fervently that I would *never* be a minister, and stormed out of the house. Two years later, at fourteen, I became the youngest Certified Lay Speaker in the Methodist Church on the Delaware-Maryland-Virginia peninsula, a supply preacher for the Methodist Conference.

In my late teens, I became estranged from Christianity and angry at the institutional church. After graduating from college, I stumbled into a Quaker meeting by accident and stayed because I was told to by an unknown Voice. Ten years later, while wrestling

over whether or not to accept a job offer that involved a major move, I heard a voice saying, "If you can't accept this job, how will you be prepared for the job I have for you next?" Recognizing a divine Voice even when I didn't believe in one, I took the job.

Not long later, I came home to Christianity and knew the place for the first time. Public ministry started to flow through me in unexpected ways. It has not stopped, in various forms and forums, for almost four decades.

God's Gospel Order means the right relationship of every part of creation with every other part. God yearns for each one of us to find our place and relationship and fill it. God calls each of us in that direction, persistently and perceptibly. Sometimes that call has been more perceptible to others than to me; sometimes I have resisted it openly. Acknowledging and surrendering to God's persistent call has been life-giving to me.

## HOLY SURRENDER TO THE CALL

I have not been called to a specific ministry or equipped with a specific set of "gifts." The call I have heard is a call into relationship, to total surrender to the will of God: a complete reorientation of my life to do God's will. "He must increase, but I must decrease..." (John 3:30, NKJV). My desire has become, like the old Ohio Yearly Meeting ministers, to do everything God asks of me, and nothing else.

Surrender to that call means arranging my life so that I am able to hear God's direction, that I am available to obey, and that I am a prepared tool for God's work: a sharpened saw, not a dull one. Each of these facets of surrender requires specific attention.

*Able to hear.* In order to hear the Divine Voice, I am dedicated to the *spirituality of subtraction*. Everything in my life is subject to the same question: "Does this help or hinder my ability to hear God's voice?" Everything that hinders my ability to hear and to act faithfully must be pruned away. Two examples of this subtraction at work are social media and simple dress.

I have no personal web page, no Facebook account, no Twitter or Instagram or whatever. I don't feel any of these things are wrong, but whenever I ask the question, the answer (for me) is that they would hinder my ability to hear God's voice. I've adapted a simple dress, including my clothing, hair, and believer's beard, one step at a time over half a century of listening to God. I believe I've been led this way not because it is a better or worse way of dressing, but as an ongoing personal exercise in listening and obeying.

*Available to obey:* Over my lifetime I've learned the importance of making a clear distinction between my competency—what I do to put food on the table—and my vocation in God's service. I chose not to work in the for profit sector, and have traded a reduction in pay for two extra weeks a year to travel in the ministry. I have relocated to a different town six times in response to a divine instruction, each of which involved a change of occupation. I aspire to have no possessions—to view everything, including each breath of life, as the gift of God. There is nothing of mine to give up in order to do what God asks—it all belongs to God already.

I am leery of money's distorting or suppressing effect on prophetic ministry. Payment for the content of prophetic ministry can encourage one to share a message God has not actually led one to share, or to discourage one from sharing an authentic message because it would be upsetting to hear. Since 1985, when I left the employ of Friends General Conference, I have paid my own way in ministry, including travel expenses, arranging for time off from my competency, and the like. I have accepted financial support for travel and room and board when in the ministry, if offered, but no honoraria or other compensation. Our yearly meeting has a trust fund for travel in the gospel ministry; since I began soliciting donations for it, I have declined to accept any money from the fund.

*Prepared to serve:* Each day I am at rest is a day of preparation for the next call. Again, God gives guidance about how to prepare if I am listening. Spiritual preparation and historical rootedness are recurrent themes in my preparation.

The longer I am in this spiritual relationship with God, the more spiritual nurture I need for sustenance. This includes daily private retirement, family devotions, regular Scripture study, and beyond. For the past several years, Susan and I have observed an annual month-long sabbath in First Month: on retreat in our home in the country, minimizing all outside contact, secular and religious, undertaking an extended examen of the past year and extended discernment on what God is leading us toward now.

Being rooted in the Quaker story has been crucial for me. My first worship inside a meeting house did not feel like coming home or like discovering I'd been a Quaker all my life—it felt weird and I felt like a stranger. But a Voice told me this was now my spiritual home—period—and it has never released me. I've felt obligated to learn as much as I can about this peculiar faith where God has planted me, to understand its strengths and weaknesses as a living faith with deep historic roots that nurture and shape it, as the faith nurtures and shapes me. I see my experiences described and explained in the writings of early Friends much as early Friends saw their experiences described and explained in the Scripture.

I was recognized in the public ministry without having any formal religious education. But in 2009, some twenty years after my service was first recorded, I graduated from Earlham School of Religion with an MA in Quaker Studies. I wanted to learn what I didn't know, but I also wanted to unlearn what I knew that wasn't true. I studied formally not to qualify as a minister, but to hone and improve those gifts already entrusted to me from God, in order to be a more faithful, more useful minister.

Of all I'm called to do as a minister of the gospel, the not doing is the hardest part. Part of me still wants to accomplish, to achieve, to write more books, do a dozen more QuakerSpeak videos, to leave a legacy. What God calls me to do is to be still until I'm given a specific task, to do that task, and return to stillness. My one continuing responsibility is to be ready.

## GOSPEL MINISTRY IS A SHARED, CORPORATE ACTIVITY

It has been impossible for me to be a faithful public Friend without the participation, guidance and support of my local faith community. In the late 1980s, a recognized minister in my monthly meeting asked if I would be willing to be recorded in the ministry. I replied that it was a matter of corporate discernment and call by the monthly meeting, and that my only response was to accept the discernment of the faith community either way. I should note that there were already five recorded ministers in that meeting of about 90 members: three women and two men.

Since I was first recorded, I've moved from one town to another four times in obedience to a divine instruction. My intent has been each time to leave my previous recording behind when I transferred membership, to see how I might be called to serve this new community without presumptions. In each case, after a shorter or longer period, I have been recorded in gospel ministry again, but the possibility was real each time that I might be needed in a different way in this new community, a way that did not involve recording or public ministry.

A couple of years ago I felt my public ministry was over and I could take off that yoke and plow. My anchor committee held my feet to the fire, saying that God was not done with me and I should continue to serve our Society as a public Friend. I surrendered to their discernment, which I believe has proven correct.

Being recorded is only the first step, one that clarifies the need for enabling and equipping the individual to serve as called. In each of the monthly meetings where I have been recorded, a different structure was used to provide the discernment, development of gifts, and right exercise of those gifts necessary to meet the needs of the faith community. The important thing is that the needed functions are carried out, not the particular support structure or the nomenclature used to describe it.

Mechanisms of my relationship to my meeting that have been most important to me have been personal relationships with other

ministers or especially elders, support or anchor committees closely linked to Ministry & Counsel, regular reporting to the monthly meeting, making appearances outside the local meeting only with the approval of a travel minute, and being accompanied by a companion, often a named elder, whenever physically traveling in the ministry.

Sharing personal stories with other named ministers has been affirming and taught me what to expect. The guidance of elders has been vital to my faithfulness.

When I faltered in vocal ministry one First Day, an elder leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Don’t do that, it only encourages them!” The admonishments of elders have often been equally terse and equally valuable.

Having a companion in public ministry has been precious in so many ways. I’m particularly thankful for Charles Ansell, Mike Arnold, Mark Wutka, Frank Massey, Susan Wilson, who have accompanied me on multiple journeys and gained a deep perspective on what I should be doing as well as what I’ll always need help with.

## CONCLUSION

In my lifetime, North American Christianity has largely embraced individual piety as the goal of religious life. My life experience, illuminated by the combined witness of three centuries, persuades me that Quakerism’s different vision is closer to the mark: our goal is to establish the Kingdom of God throughout the Creation, a Gospel Order in which harmonious relationship is sustained under Divine guidance and assistance. Our goal is that right relationship, not individual piety. This changed understanding means that a solitary Quaker is not possible; the local faith community is the basic unit which models the Quaker vision: the Kingdom of God as lived reality.

Spiritual gifts, including the gifts of public ministry, are given to monthly meetings as needed to accomplish their part in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Meetings have a responsibility to

name these gifts as they emerge; to help individuals claim, develop, and exercise them faithfully; and to agree to receive the fruits of faithfulness as these gifts are exercised.

Gifts become more clearly manifest in individuals as the individual and meeting jointly acknowledge them and surrender all else to use them as God intends. God's call to individuals is a persistent invitation to become a servant, not a call to the exercise of specific gifts or a specific mission. One can see in hindsight that one has been used in specific ways, but we should not limit present and future divine possibilities. The specifics of how one serves once one has surrendered to being a servant are the task of corporate discernment involving the entire faith community.