

**Doing the Unspeakable:
Identifying, Developing, and Supporting
Leadership among Quakers**

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*“Quaker institutions – our meetings, schools, colleges and committees – are going through crises of leadership. We are experiencing difficulties finding, developing and supporting leaders who can undertake the complicated responsibilities of leading us. At the heart of Friends’ crisis of leadership is a deep and unexamined ambivalence about the exercise of power. Unless Friends can come to some greater clarity about the nature of authority, our institutions, the instruments we have created to express our religious faith, will continue to lose vitality and purpose.”*¹

This observation about the state of leadership in Quaker institutions and congregations came from a Quaker scholar more than twenty years ago. It was echoed by a group of leading Friends who had studied this topic just two years earlier.² Little has changed. So an invitation to write about how Quakers identify, develop, and support leaders presents a curious challenge. One might fairly accurately answer, “Nothing.” But this has not always been so; is not entirely the case now; and certainly should not be true. So, further examination of the question is worthwhile.

For the contemporary Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), at least among *unprogrammed Friends** – those who hold to the patterns of Quaker worship and practices most like those of early Quakerism – questions about leadership are tricky for many reasons. One is that these Friends historically have had no paid clergy. Thus, there is no professional class of leadership at all in (this branch of) Quakerism. Another reason is that Quakerism is fundamentally a congregational polity, going to great lengths to minimize any assignment of formal authority outside of the congregation (called a Monthly Meeting). Furthermore, Friends have eschewed doctrinal edicts about how the church should operate.

In addition, unprogrammed Quakerism in the late 20th century developed a deep-seeded “allergy to authority.”³ So much so that even persons in the informal, voluntary, traditional positions of committee or congregational leadership – the unpaid “clerks” who are responsible to guide our decision making processes – are often challenged should they try to assert any real influence in a meeting. The quotation above reflects this. Indeed, in discussions within Quaker organizations it is not uncommon to hear people say the very concept of leadership is *un-Quakerly*.

Despite all this, many Quakers want their congregations and institutions to be more effective in addressing their own needs and those of the world. They want them to grow rather than shrink, and gain rather than lose strength and significance. Some know that skilled and spiritually grounded leadership is needed for that to happen. So Friends need to learn how to identify, develop, and support leadership, even they we cannot speak about it in conventional terms.

* Quakerism suffered several schisms in the 1800’s, and several branches now worship in a manner much like other Protestant churches, and employ pastors to lead that worship. I write here only about branches that hold to the traditional practices of “meetings for worship” with no planned “order of service” or pastors.

This essay explores the history of, impediments to, and possibilities for identifying and developing leaders in and for the Religious Society of Friends. The intention is to provide insights on the Quaker experience that might be of some value to both Quakers and others.

As indicated above, the context for my explorations is quite different from those in other polities. The following are important distinctions. (1) There are virtually no formal requirements for being appointed as a clerk [nominal ‘leader’] of a Quaker Meeting. (2) No religious credentials or training are needed to be head of any Quaker organization. (3) Unprogrammed Friends are now so diverse theologically that there is no widely shared understanding of purposes and roles leaders’ should fulfill in congregations or institutions. (4) One can envision changes to improve leadership development, but absent almost all the denominational structures that could serve as tools, and radical cultural changes in contemporary Quakerism, implementing them will be impossible. Consequently, I approach this topic differently than others might.

I begin by briefly considering the purpose of leadership in and for unprogrammed Meetings and Quaker institutions, and then clarifying operative definitions of polity and leadership for this essay. Next, I explore the character and context of leadership in Quakerism from an historical perspective, examining how gifts and skills needed for effective leadership for this religious communion were identified, developed, and supported in the past. Then I look at what is needed now, given our current context. Finally, I suggest what Quakers and others might learn from our experience and practice, and what Quakers could do to improve a troubling situation.

Leadership for “the Church,” and the First Quakers

The Religious Society of Friends has its origins in a particular expression of the Christian faith. Early Quakers understood the religious movement they were launching to be “primitive Christianity revived.”⁴ The model for the movement they sought to create was the early church as described in the Book of Acts. The leader they sought to follow was Jesus Christ himself as “the living Teacher.” The ways in which Quakers chose to worship and conduct the business of the church reflected their sure convictions that “the living Christ had come to teach his people himself,”⁵ and lead the church himself, and would do so as long as people would “worship him in Spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24). Therefore, early Quakers saw the purpose of leadership in and for their religious movement in terms of the model of the early church.

In the New Testament there are clear indications of the purpose of leadership in that church. The charge Jesus gave the apostles, as those persons he called to lead the church with him (Mt. 10. (esp.5-10)), and after his resurrection (Acts 28:18-20), has a particular focus. These instructions emphasize two things. First, the apostles were to go out into the world to invite people to enter into the same kind of relationship with God that Jesus himself had and invited others into – one of direct communion with and guidance from God. They were to proclaim, and invite others into, *the kingdom of God*, a way of being and a spiritual community where there was an immediate experience of God’s love and healing power (Lk. 4:16-19). They were to demonstrate this by loving everyone, even healing others where they could. Second, they were to continue both his teaching ministry and his practical ministry of compassion to the vulnerable or dispossessed – the old, the ill, the poor, and the outcasts (Mt. 25:31-46). Finally, they were

charged to take this ministry “to all the nations” (Mt. 28:19), and so expand and diversify the blessed community that would experience and transmit the power and love of God in the world.

In short, the first leaders of the church came to be qualified for that leadership as they became committed and faithful disciples of Christ. It was by becoming the best followers they could be that these people became the first leaders of “the Way,” one name by which the earliest Christian movement was known. In this context leadership and ministry were virtually synonymous. The apostles’ first purpose was to lead others into the same kind of relationship with God that Jesus had helped them find, and so change the world.

As the name suggests, the Way was a movement, not an institution. As the church became an institution, it required leaders with additional – or other – gifts and skill sets, beyond teaching, healing, and preaching. Early recognition of this is evident when Paul cites “administration” as one of the gifts of the Spirit (Rom. 12:28). As the church universal split and splintered into many churches, they defined and designed themselves differently, leading to different conceptions and roles of leadership. This is why polity makes a difference.

Definitions

Polity, as I use the term in this article, refers to *formal structures, rules, and stated expectations intended to govern the operations of a religious community or church body*. One key facet of polity, therefore, involves the locus of authority. That is, where power resides for making decisions and settling disputes. Another key facet involves both stated rules and actual processes for decision making and dispute resolution. That is, how authority is generated and exercised. As for these two facets of polity, Quakerism is like many other traditions in the first. But it is almost unique in the second.

Typically religious bodies are either congregational in their polity, where final authority in the making of decisions and resolution of disputes rests at the local (congregational) level; or they are groups where that authority is held in some way outside and over the local congregation, for instance by a bishop (episcopal polity) or a appointed body (like a presbytery). Traditional Quakerism is essentially a congregational polity. Each congregation or Meeting has substantial authority and freedom to define and practice the faith as it chooses.

There are traditional beliefs and practices in Quakerism. These are articulated in books of “Faith & Practice” (or “Discipline”). Monthly Meetings usually belong to Quarterly and Yearly Meetings – larger, regional bodies.⁶ Yearly Meetings compose and update Books of Faith & Practice. And, occasionally, Friends have acted together in Quarterly or Yearly Meetings – larger, regional bodies – to take positions on issues to which all members were expected to adhere. (One example would be the movement to ban slave-holding in the 1700’s.) However, if one Monthly Meeting chooses to describe or practice the faith somewhat differently than other congregations in the same Yearly Meeting, it can usually do so without suffering any serious consequences.

In relation to decision making, the practice of organizational leadership in a Quaker context is made much more difficult by the distinctive views Quakers hold about collective discernment.

As a theological matter, Quakers traditionally held that the actual and effective head of the church is the living Christ. The unprogrammed style of worship reflects this conviction in the belief that worship should not follow any preset form, but should take that form and hold that content that the Holy Spirit (or living Christ) will give to it on each occasion. The Quaker practice of collective discernment and decision making is shaped by the same beliefs.

(It should be noted here that among unprogrammed Friends significant theological diversity has created a context where some members would be uncomfortable with this traditional Christian language to describe the discernment process. Still, even if the reference point is a less well-defined Spirit, or ‘Source’ of divine wisdom, the practice of discernment as a search for spiritual insight and unity remains central to Quaker practice.)

The occasions in which Quaker congregations do their business are meetings for worship. In running such a meeting, the clerk describes an agenda, and guides but does not control the meeting. The business should be conducted in a prayerful manner that invites the input of all, with guidance from the clerk, and the weight given to any spoken view on any topic should depend on the content of that contribution, not the status or role of the one who offers it. The intent is to seek the will of God through the prayerful listening and worshipful speaking of all. Only when all present come to share the view that an action being recommended represents the group’s best apprehension of God’s will can the Meeting settle the matter and/or take collective action.⁷

Moving people to and organizing them in action to see and do what they want to be or achieve is considerably more difficult when collective action requires unity in collective discernment. Thus leadership in the clerk’s role requires a style and skills that are much more about the exercise of influence than of authority or power.

Leadership is a complex idea. There are many studies of leadership, and a wide range of definitions of the concept.

For this essay I employ a definition that is as close to purely functional as possible. Here leadership is defined as “an ability or activity to persuade and enable others to discern, choose, pursue, and eventually achieve goals for themselves and others.” In other words, leadership is about moving people to and organizing them in action by helping them see what they want to be or achieve; and then helping them do what is needed to become or achieve that. In this view, the leadership of a religious community or organization will help that community or organization discover what it is called to be or do in the world – partly by framing that calling in the spiritual tradition and values that community represents – and then help it move towards that vision.

Many different types or roles of leadership may emerge in a religious community within this broad, functional definition. Prophetic leadership, pastoral leadership, and administrative leadership are just three. These different roles require different attributes and skills in leaders. What is needed of different types of leaders will also vary with the context – time, place, and conditions – in which they are acting. So, even a simple, practical definition of leadership, like “helping people see and achieve what they want,” becomes very complex when embedded in the realities of practice.

A final observation about both polity and leadership may be useful here, which has to do with the difference between structures, rules, and ways of operating that are “formal” versus those that are “informal.” “Formal” structures and procedures are well-articulated with a stated rationale, are usually written, and are usually publicly accessible, so that everyone in an institution or organization may now how things should be done, why, and what is intended to result. Informal structures and procedures are frequently not written nor publicly accessible to all, are often a matter of custom or habit whose rationale is not clear, and often operate in ways that are invisible to some (even many) participants in the system.

Some churches, the Roman Catholics for instance, have extensive and highly detailed written rules (Canon Law) to define their structures, and to determine how power is generated and exercised within those structures, and by whom. Most communions have some of these clear definitions and hard rules. Organizational theory and research makes clear, however, that informal traditions, systems and rules are often very important – sometimes the most important factor – in determining how power and resources are actually distributed and used, even in the most formally and fully articulated institutional systems.

One of the things that make it very hard to explore these issues among Quakers and their institutions is that formal – or, at least, hard and fast – rules are almost non-existent, and almost always have been. Whereas, informal rules, unspoken expectations, invisible boundaries, and semi-sacred customs abound. Thus, the informal polity of Quakerism has often been far more important than, and has even supplanted, the formal polity. This creates a situation in which the acceptance, assignment, and delegation of authority for the completion of tasks in, or for the direction (leadership) of, Quaker bodies is difficult and contentious.

Leadership among Early Friends

Since early Quakers sought to follow in the footsteps of the first disciples, their first leaders were almost all powerful preachers who led by word and example. Their own experience of the living Christ and the Holy Spirit had transformed them so that they knew and expected to be able to transmit the power and love of God to others; and thus be able to lead others to a similar experience of the Divine presence.

They tried as well to live in full conformity to Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount – for example, treating all with equal dignity as children of God regardless of social status; refusing to swear oaths, and letting their “yes be yes, and their no, no” (Mt. 5:37); and turning the other cheek and refusing to meet violence with violence.⁸ They did this hoping to embody and help bring forward the kingdom of God that Jesus promised. They intended thus to preach by example, “letting their lives speak.”

In its earliest stages the Quaker movement was both seeking to reach new people with the invitation to faith and trying to transform the world for the better. So, its criteria for leadership was essentially charismatic and effective. Leaders were to be known “by their fruits” (Mt. 7:17). Those who gave the clearest evidence of being faithful disciples of Christ, having been transformed themselves, and who showed the greatest gifts for transmitting that experience and vision to others (primarily through effective preaching), became the movement’s first leaders.

But when the movement met strong persecution, the need for other kinds of leaders was clear. Then persons with the gifts and skills to help organize the community so it could support those who suffered from persecution stepped forward and were recognized.⁹ The need arose to maintain discipline and order in the community, so Friends did not suffer unnecessarily (at least) when some promoted beliefs and behaviors that were not truly those of the community as a whole. (This involved much collaboration across the wider Society; and this experience, interestingly, mirrors that of the early church in many ways.)

Changing Roles in Leadership over Time

The need for, and ways of recognizing and supporting, different kinds of ministry and leadership emerged early in the history of Quakerism. Most historians date the founding of Quakerism as a movement in 1652. Formal recognition both of “public ministers,” those with gifts and skills to share and teach the faith both within and outside of the community, and of “elders,” those with gifts and skills to discern, nurture, and support the work of those ministers, and to organize the work of pastoral care within community, begins to happen by the late 1680’s. A formal system of calling forth, honing, and supporting the gifts in ministry (and leadership) of at least some individuals for these roles is well established by 1730.¹⁰

For both these roles the authority to recognize and affirm individuals’ gifts and fitness resided with the Monthly Meeting of which they were a part, not some more distant body. This was because the “qualifications” of ministers and elders were seen to be both a matter of spiritual gifts and character, and of effective talents and skills; and so could only be expected to be truly discerned by those who saw them in their daily lives. It was true, though, that the qualifications and service of “public ministers” could be confirmed (and sometimes challenged) by Quarterly and Monthly Meetings.

Quakerism ceased to be a charismatic, evangelizing movement, and became instead something much more akin to a sect, or a small, self-isolating communion fairly quickly. By the early to mid-1700’s the Society had turned inward, and become more focused on maintaining discipline in its ranks than reaching new converts. By then the Religious Society of Friends was a highly institutionalized body with many, growing formalities surrounding roles and offices, and many peculiar practices intended to set Friends apart from the world.

Although Quakerism remained essentially congregational in its orientation, in the 1700’s other kinds of organizations, and some centralization of functions – in Quarterly Meetings and Yearly Meetings – was well established. Over the next two centuries many Quaker institutions, like schools, hospitals, and service agencies, were founded as well. These developments led to the creation of new positions of responsibility, potential influence, and status within the Society of Friends as these institutions became significant in its life.

Quaker Traditions for Raising Up Leadership

Noting these changes in the Religious Society of Friends, it is important to distinguish between leadership roles in congregations and leadership roles in other religious institutions. Historians point to critical transitions occurring in Protestant denominations in the United States in the

1800's as a range of voluntary associations associated with religious bodies are created, become more formal and significant, and evolve towards what might now be called para-church agencies or "faith-based organizations." Some were of national prominence like the American Bible Society (founded in 1816), while many others were local or regional.¹¹

Quakers, despite a strongly anti-institutional bias within the Society, had founded many schools, hospitals and service agencies by the mid-1800's. The development of these kinds of institutions led to a need for organizational leaders whose business and management (and other professional) skills had to be as strong as (or stronger than) their gifts for pastoral or preaching ministries. For Friends, this presented a particular challenge, because the nature of their congregations did not require or promote the development of organizational leadership or management skills in the same ways being the pastor of a large church or a bishop in another polity might prepare one to lead a Christian school or college or service agency. On the other hand, Friends excelled in business and other professions where they developed impressive organizational and management skills, and began to bring those skills to Quaker institutions.¹²

As for congregational leadership, systems had developed within Meetings to raise up and support persons in the 'offices' of minister and elder. Along with the office of clerk, these were the primary roles of religious service and leadership among Friends historically. The processes for identifying and encouraging Friends to serve in these roles were not really codified, and mostly consisted of personal nurture and apprenticeship. Friends who were recognized for potential gifts to serve in these roles were called forth and nurtured, and usually served first, within the context of their home Meeting. They might later serve in the larger bodies of the Quarterly or Yearly Meeting. The roles of minister and elder were closely intertwined as one responsibility of elders was to discern, call forth, and nurture those who appeared to have gifts in the ministry.

Those recognized as ministers were those most likely to speak acceptably in meetings for worship in their own Meeting. They might then to travel among Meetings, often speaking in meetings for worship elsewhere – some of which might be specially "appointed" when they visited. When these individuals first offered vocal ministry in worship in their own Meetings, one role of an elder was to encourage them if they spoke well. Or an Elder, sensing a gift in them, might encourage them to respond to a "prompting of the Spirit" to speak, if they felt it but had not. At times experienced ministers invited younger Friends who appeared to have gifts for ministry to travel with them, or to make visits to homes (to worship with families). An elder might also encourage this in a budding minister who seemed to be ready for this step.

A classic example of this is found in John Woolman, a famous of 18th century Friends, who was a recorded minister of the Gospel as well as a noted social activist and author. As a relatively young man he was asked by elders in his Meeting to travel with an experienced minister who was making a journey in the ministry. That experience was the beginning of his development in the service of "public ministry," as he was nurtured by both elders and other ministers. He was eventually acknowledged for his gifts, "recorded," as a public minister; and from then on traveled (frequently) with the support and under the care of his Meeting.¹³

Woolman's story illustrates how practices of identifying, developing, and supporting ministers and elders involved forms of both apprenticeship and mutual support. Ministers and elders met

together in “meetings of ministers and elders,” which gathered for worship, mutual support, and to examine together one another’s service and calling as well as the spiritual state of the Meeting. (Such gatherings occurred at the Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Meeting level.)

The traveling ministry was one of the most important aspects and forms of leadership in the Religious Society for 200 years. Not only did these ministers offer important teaching and preaching intended to sustain the spiritual vitality of various Meetings and the Religious Society as whole, and unite it across distances; they also helped push forward and deepen the social ideals and practices that Friends hoped would help “mend the world”¹⁴ deriving from Quaker spiritual and ethical convictions (“testimonies”). Traveling ministers played key roles in pushing forward the causes of abolition, fair treatment of Native Americans, and the equality of women.

Here again, the roles of ministers and elders were complementary. Ministers were supported in their service by elders, and elders urged members to come into unity around a shared vision of Quaker testimonies. It is by these processes, for instance, that the Religious Society of Friends became the first Christian body in the U.S. to fully disavow slavery.

Finally, clerks are important here, because they are the Friends responsible for guiding meetings for business in which all these important matters were decided or confirmed. The appointments of persons to these offices or roles; decisions about what testimonies and standards (like refusing to hold slaves) were binding on all members; and the broader range of practical decisions about the collective life of the Meeting (like those involving budgets or property) were made in meetings for business that were intended to embody the practice of corporate spiritual discernment, and were guided by the clerks.

We know less about how clerks were nurtured and chosen, but again the primary mechanism appears to have been a kind of apprenticeship. There was no formal training or school for clerks. Friends were expected to learn the practice by observation, or osmosis. Since very few Friends were converts, and so many grew up in Quaker meetings, many had that opportunity. It also appears that persons who showed talent were given progressively larger opportunities to develop and exhibit the skills of clerking, serving in less important committees first, then more important ones, before they would be asked to be the clerk of a Monthly Meeting (or anything larger).

The same could be said about how a Friend might be chosen for an important role in a Quaker institution – for instance, as head of a Quaker school, or as a clerk of a committee with oversight of a school. In these roles with these institutions, in which a Friend would often have a higher profile in and have to do business with the larger community, it was important to have Friends who were spiritually solid, as they would represent the Religious Society to the outside world. But they also needed to have higher levels of professional or organizational skills, as these were required to manage the affairs of the institution as it did business with the world. Holding such a position could give that Friend more weight when she or he participated in the work and leadership of the Meeting.¹⁵

Finally, the development of religious agencies or institutions affiliated with (but beyond the immediate control of) churches and denominations continued through the 19th and 20th centuries, accelerating in recent decades, among Friends as well as others. As this happened, persons

leading these organizations were (and are) providing critical, public leadership in American religion, and many of them were (and are) not clergy. With these developments the simple identification of “leadership” with traditional “ministry” (centered in preaching and pastoring) begins to break down. Persons who are trying to change the world in accordance with a religious vision pursued through the creation of, participation in, or management of various kinds of service or advocacy organizations could become religious leaders in their own right. This was and is as true – maybe even truer – for Friends as for any other denomination.

In the end we have to make educated guesses about how much of this identification and development of leadership occurred in Quaker Meetings and institutions, because Friends did not write about these matters very much. It appears that the mechanisms and criteria for identifying and nurturing persons to play leadership roles among Friends – after the transition from movement to sect, but prior to the mid-20th century – were well developed but largely informal, or at least rarely articulated. They centered around small groups of individuals – ministers, elders, clerks, and other “weighty Friends” – who, having acquired influence and status themselves, brought others into the circles of leadership by identifying and nurturing them personally through a mentoring system. All this was possible because this was a small, close-knit community, strongly bound by tradition and involving very few newcomers, where identifying people’s gifts and skills, and creating mentoring relationships, were relatively easy.

In the last half of the 20th century, however, the stability and insularity of the Quaker community began to break down.¹⁶ Many who grew up in Quaker families left the community, while many who were not born into the faith came to join. So the processes for developing new leadership also broke down. This old model for identifying and developing new leaders simply could not work in a context where many, eventually the majority, of members of Friends Meetings grew up elsewhere, and came into membership as adults. These people could not learn or absorb the key ideals and practices by observation or osmosis, nor be selected early on to be mentored into these positions.

As a result, many heads of Quaker institutions, as well as many of the clerks of Meetings, are persons who, not having been raised as Friends, have not had fuller opportunities to experience and comprehend Quaker practice more deeply. And, as Quaker institutions have grown in numbers and complexity, many have accepted non-Friends in key staff positions because they could not find Quakers with the skills sets needed to fill those jobs. So there is widespread worry, as noted before,¹⁷ among those responsible for Quaker institutions, including our congregations, about the absence of people with the capacities – who are spiritually-grounded, skilled, and willing and able to give their time and energy – to offer the leadership needed.

The State of Leadership among Unprogrammed Friends Now

The changing circumstances just noted go a long way towards explaining the challenges Quakers face now. Add to this a general disinterest, or unwillingness, to even think or talk about leadership, and the picture gets even more problematic.

To see this we have only to look at what Quakers say in their official publications about the nature and work of leadership and their Religious Society. We find, in fact, that Quakers hardly

say anything about it. It is remarkable that arguably the most famous book of quotations from and about Quakers, Christian Faith & Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends,¹⁸ has not a single entry in its index on the topic. The most recent Faith & Practice of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the most prominent Quaker judicatory in the U.S., exhibits the same silence.

A vision of what should characterize the personal, spiritual qualities of leadership among Friends is offered in the report Friends as Leaders. It says: “Friends believe that true leadership consists first and foremost in being led. . . . The only authentic leadership is divine followership. The converse of this is that when leadership ceases to be Spirit-led, it ceases to be authentic.”¹⁹ These are statements with which most Friends would agree.²⁰

On the other hand, a further observation accompanying this would find less agreement. It states that “a high degree of interdependence and mutuality is required between leaders and the community of faith: without followers there can be no leaders.”²¹ Recent experience suggests that among unprogrammed Friends there are few who are likely to describe themselves or behave as “followers” under any circumstances.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that even in the report just cited, where the term “leadership” is used freely, there is much discussion of the personal or spiritual attributes Friends want to see in their leaders; but there is virtually no discussion of the skills of leadership. There is no analysis of how strategic thinking, organizing, relationship building, persuasive writing and speaking, or negotiation are important competencies needed to be effective in moving a Quaker Meeting or institution into action. Nor is there any discussion of where and how those skills can be acquired; nor of how they might relate to spiritual and personal attributes named before.

It makes sense that a religious community so steeped in an embodied vision of ministry, so concerned that people’s “lives should speak,” would focus on the need for leadership to be personal, authentic, and spiritually grounded. Still, a critical question remains: “How can that leadership be effective if it is unskilled?” The recent experiences in some Quaker institutions demonstrate how leadership which is spiritually grounded but lacking in skill can be just as ineffective – even disastrous – as leadership that is skilled but spiritually void.

The focus on the personal and spiritual side of leadership (as well as our history) led the group of Friends that examined these issues 25 years ago to observe that “Quaker leaders learn their skills through practice and through observation of more experienced leaders;” and to claim that “leadership is best nurtured in the local Meeting.”²² The first observation may be true for most Friends who come to serve as clerks. But at the level of skill development (as well as spiritual formation) the later claim is dubious.

If this way of developing leaders is so effective, why was there so much talk then, and still so much evidence now, of the lack of leadership? And can’t so many Meetings and institutions find “[Quaker] leaders who can undertake the complicated responsibilities of leading us?”²³ Most local Meetings are small, and simply do not provide the right setting, opportunities, or skilled mentoring to produce new leaders.

Developing Leadership for Friends: Impediments and Possibilities

This history, especially recent history, reveals critical impediments to the development and practice of leadership in Quaker Meetings and institutions now, as well as what may be most needed to change this troubling picture. There are four of these pairs – impediments and possibilities – I suggest need examination here.

(1) An Allergy to Authority and Hysteria about Hierarchy

Like many groups with strongly held ideals about radical equality, unprogrammed Friends struggle to achieve effective collective action because of a general unwillingness to assign or delegate any meaningful authority for task completion or decision making to individuals or small groups. We harbor deep fears of anyone “being in charge,” and of elevating any person’s status, even temporarily.²⁴ These tendencies seem rooted in a scripturally sound but badly misapplied commitment to honor in the inherent dignity of every human being as a person created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). The confusion here is between equality and egalitarianism.

Affirming the inestimable worth and social equality of all people, on the one hand, and refusing to recognize real differences in people’s skills, interests, intelligence, character, life experience, or professional competency, on the other, are two very different matters. Treating all people fairly does not always mean – and may even be at odds with – treating them identically. This sort of confusion has often derailed sound decision making, crippled the capacity for collective action, and undermined leadership among contemporary Friends.

One possibility for overcoming this impediment is to reclaim the ideals Friends originally held about the right foundations for discernment, decision making, and service, which derive from Paul’s explanation of the church at work as “the body of Christ” (Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12).

In this perspective, many people with different gifts serve one God and “the same Spirit.” In this vision all kinds of service are honored, and various people are appointed to or affirmed in different kinds of service depending on their respective gifts. In this vision people’s roles change over time. As circumstances or tasks change, each person may be a leader in one context and a follower in another. Moreover, these roles are primarily functional, with no special status being assigned to, or sought after, in either. In this vision all people can be called forth, recognized, and supported in the use of their gifts, while being held accountable by the community of faith. In this vision leadership is not only possible but empowered by the community’s desire to see the fullest possible “manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor. 12:7).

(2) Understanding Good Intentions are Insufficient without Effective Action

Another central tenet of Quakerism, deriving from the belief we are all created in the image of God, is a conviction that there is a spark of the Divine, or “that of God,” in every person. This “inner light,” Friends believe, helps us discern God’s presence and will, and creates a channel through which we can also connect with other people on a deeper, spiritual level. Given these views of human nature, Friends tend to emphasize the potential for positive transformation in every person, and give less weight to the power or reality of evil as an element of human nature and experience.

Of course, optimism is often a good thing. It is a vital force that moves us to try to improve our lives and the world. (Why would we try if we thought hope was illusory?) And Friends have frequently expressed sentiments to the effect that, “No work undertaken in love can ever be a real failure. The power of love is such that these efforts will inevitably have some good result.”

However, it is important as well to recognize the limitations of good intentions, and see that the law of unintended consequences can have bad as well as good effects. Wanting something to be, or even being able to describe how conditions would appear if some ideal – for instance, racial justice – were realized, is not that same as knowing how to address the factors that currently prevent that; and certainly not the same as making an effort – mobilizing resources, developing a plan that could succeed, and following through – to achieve that.

If Friends truly believe that individual action, and holding and expressing the right ideas about or intentions toward social or spiritual problems, is sufficient to honor our faith and change the world in these matters, then having skilled leadership in Quaker organizations will be relatively unimportant. On the other hand, if Friends recognize that being able to discern, choose, and pursue strategic goals effectively is necessary to actually change the world with regard to those problems, and this is something we want of our Meetings and organizations, then having and supporting real, skilled leadership in Quaker organizations will be crucial.

Moreover, the observations noted earlier are true here: To have effective leaders requires there be persons who are willing – at least in some contexts – to be followers. To be effective in acting for social change requires organizing and working together as followers as well as leaders.

(3) The Absence of Structures to Develop and Support Leadership

We saw that among Friends the traditional models for leadership development and training were primarily informal and depended heavily on individuals already in leadership taking initiative to mentor others coming along. There were understandings and practices for how this should work, but they were not well articulated. It is telling that the first Quaker seminary devoted to preparing Friends for service in the ministry – pastoral ministry or other forms – was not founded until the 1960’s.²⁵ (Among branches of Quakerism that had adopted programmed worship and paid clergy as far back as the late 1800’s there was a willingness to have others train their leaders and apparently no felt urgency to train their own.) A commitment to formal education to prepare persons both spiritually and practically for leadership among Friends simply had no traction until the last half-century. Interestingly, since the 1980’s this seminary has drawn large numbers of unprogrammed Friends who, while they do not expect to become pastors, want the kind of theological and practical education that it offers.

The absence of such institutions is, no doubt, partly a reflection of the absence of almost any meaningful “denomination structures” in Quakerism. In a keen analysis of the distinctions between congregations and denominations, Warner points out that “to the extent that the denomination exists . . . it trains, certifies, disciplines, nurtures, and pensions members of the clergy.”²⁶ Lacking a professional clergy entirely, at least until the late 1800’s, the Religious Society of Friends had no need for denominational institutions whose mission was to train and develop religious leaders for its congregations. Lacking institutions to do this, Friends who

sought such education had either to go elsewhere for such opportunities, as many have, or to create alternatives that could work in the present context, which we have not.

It is generally the case that those who serve in positions of local pastoral leadership (or larger denominational roles) in other polities can partake of many systems, formal and informal, that support them in their work. These include local ministeriums, continuing education offerings for pastors, and other denominational networks. It is also a primary role of many denominational executives, especially at the regional judicatory level, to provide personal and professional support to these ministers.

So, how could this be remedied among Friends? A first step would be for Quaker institutions and those that run them to recognize that melding professional skills with spiritual values in the work of organizations that desire to embody spiritual values in service is a critical but complex endeavor.²⁷ Achieving this is vital for institutions that wish to offer education, social services, counseling, and such in ways that are spiritually grounded in and bear witness to the ideals and insights of the Quaker tradition. Providing staff and volunteer development opportunities that integrate practical and spiritual education is thus crucial.

A second step is to develop or build up institutions that have the capacity to provide such educational and development opportunities. If Friends want skilled, spiritually grounded leadership for our organizations, then we need to develop and support institutions that can nurture, train, and help sustain that leadership. This just cannot all be done within our congregations anymore.

A third step is to take seriously the need to provide encouragement and practical and financial support to those who want to partake of these opportunities to prepare themselves for, or sustain themselves in, positions of leadership among Friends.

The challenge here is to find ways to create networks and structures that can serve to develop the skills and knowledge of those who wish to offer leadership; to have those provided in venues and formats that make them readily accessible to volunteers as well as professionals; and to give genuine encouragement and support to those we think could become the leaders we need to build the future and fulfill the mission of the Religious Society of Friends.

(4) *Recovering a Sense of Mission*

The last point takes us back to where we began, which has to do with the absence of vision and mission for contemporary, unprogrammed Quakerism. Since this faith community has come to embrace an extraordinary theological diversity; has largely assimilated (even reified) the rampant individualism of the secular culture; and has spent much of its history avoiding any authentic engagement with the wider world for fear of eroding its unique character, it should not be a surprise that it lacks a widely shared sense of mission. Yet, as some folk sage once observed, “If you don’t know where you are going, it doesn’t matter how you get there.” And if it does not matter what route one takes, then surely leadership is completely irrelevant. So where would a sense of mission come from?

The possibility for something new here actually comes from reaching back into the very core and fundamental genius of Quaker faith and practice. For the central and most powerful insight of Quakerism has been that all true guidance and transformative good works have their roots in worship. The lives of Friends like John Woolman and Elizabeth Fry – and others whose service transformed their communities and their times – demonstrate that they found their vision, their strength, and ongoing guidance in rooting and re-rooting themselves in the practices of shared worship and solitary prayer. Indeed, this reinforcing dynamic of service being stimulated by and grounded in worship, and richer worship and a deeper relationship with God being fed by the experiences and challenges of service, has marked Quakerism at its best since its origins.

So, if a new and compelling sense of mission is to emerge for contemporary Quakerism, it may only come when our community commits itself seriously to renewing a more frequent and deeper practice of worship, of “waiting on the Lord,” while maintaining an openness to seeing how the world needs us to serve. It might be that such a calling to serve, rooted and confirmed in worship, broadly discerned and widely shared, would evoke commitments to leadership and followership that would astound us.

A Personal Postscript

In this text one might hear a voice that sounds deeply critical of the Religious Society of Friends; or that speaks only of the problems and failures of its leadership, and conclude that the author despairs of its future. A reader might conclude that I think all our congregations and institutions are ineffective and “unleadable,” or that we have no leaders at all. So, in closing I want to emphasize what is good, praiseworthy, and holds the potential for a brighter future in this community of faith now.

First, there is genius in the Quaker insight and insistence that all authentic religious leadership has to be spiritually grounded – that is, born of and fed by a genuine, vital relationship with the Divine. This is, I believe, an absolutely necessary (though not sufficient) condition for religious leadership to be effective over the long-term. The critical claim emphasized above is that it is also crucial for leadership to be “skilled,” knowing what “skilled” means varies in differing contexts.

That noted, it should be observed that the Religious Society of Friends today is blessed to have many persons serve its Meetings and organizations in different roles – as clerks, on committees, and in staff positions – who are both spiritually grounded and skilled. These Friends do provide leadership and make a difference for good in our Meetings and organizations. I know this because I have often seen them and been privileged to work with them. They can do much to mentor a new generation of leadership to come.

Some of our Meetings and some of our institutions are doing wonderful things, helping to mend the world, caring for and healing individuals, and letting their lives speak of the love and power of God as that is made visible in the work they do, the services they provide, and the care they offer to members, residents, students, clients and others. The skilled and caring leaders who work in those institutions make much of that possible.

However, the work of leaders in those institutions is often much more difficult than it should be because of the cultural dynamics described here. They often pay an exceptionally heavy cost for carrying the tasks of leadership in our ranks. This is why “the burn-out of those willing to take on such responsibilities is increasingly swift and destructive.”²⁸

To borrow an old image, I want to affirm the glass of Quaker leadership is half-full. But I also observe that means it is half empty, and that is the challenge before us. The Religious Society of Friends has an extraordinary history of having a positive impact far disproportionate to its numbers. That has been the result of a deep commitment to faithful waiting for and learning from Divine guidance; of individuals taking roles in leadership guided and empowered by such faithfulness, and being supported by their community; and of others being willing to follow the leadership they offered in movements and institutions that have had a transformative affect on the larger culture. Whether the future of Quakerism is as promising or significant may well depend on whether we can cultivate and practice spiritually authentic and practically skilled leadership appropriate for this era; and practice thoughtful, energetic followership as well.

Notes:

¹ Quakers and the Use of Power, p. 3. (Paul Lacey, Pendle Hill pamphlet #241, 1982) ,

² Friends as Leaders: The Vision, Instrument, and Methods was a published report (Pendle Hill, 1980) from a workshop convened in 1979 to examine the difficulties of leadership among Quakers. It involved staff and volunteer heads of a number of Quaker organizations of different types. In the introduction to the report these Friends observe, “There are not enough competent, committed Friends willing to assume positions as [heads of our institutions]. ... There is a complementary fact: the burn-out of those willing to take on such responsibilities is increasingly swift and destructive” (p.3).

³ The seeds of our difficulty with leadership first appear early in Quakerism, as some scholars have long noted. For instance, in Puritan Boston & Quaker Philadelphia, (Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, 1996), E. Digby Baltzell comments on “the Quaker ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward leadership”(p. 169). Baltzell sees this in evidence in Philadelphia Quakerism in the 1700’s, and argues it had a longstanding deleterious effect on the culture of that city.

⁴ The standard history of early Quakerism is found in two volumes, The Beginnings of Quakerism (1912) and The Second Period of Quakerism (1919) by William Braithwaite. There have been many more popular histories, like Friends for 300 Years, (Pendle Hill, 1976) by Howard Brinton. The most recent comprehensive history is The Quakers (Friends United Press, 1988) by Barbour and Frost.

⁵ Early Quaker preachers frequently referred to a vital experience of Jesus as the Inward Teacher or Living Christ, emphasizing that a life giving faith, an authentic relationship with God, and true ministry required and rested on a direct experience of the Divine Presence. It is this experience which is sought in Quaker meeting for worship, from which vocal ministry should spring, and to which that ministry (in the ideal) should lead the meeting.

⁶ Quaker church bodies are named for how often they gather to “do business.” Local congregations meet once a month to do business. A Quarterly Meeting is a regional body encompassing a number of Monthly Meetings, and gathers every three months to attend to the affairs of Friends in that region; a Yearly Meeting encompasses a number of Quarterly Meetings (and many Monthly Meetings), and gathers regularly on a yearly basis (in full session) to do the same. [Note: This is the nomenclature in the U.S. It varies slightly in Britain.]

⁷ Interestingly, the best book on this Quaker practice of decision making, Beyond Majority Rule, (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1979), was written by a Jesuit priest, Fr. Michel Sheeran.

⁸ Numerous scholars have noted how Quakerism's social ethics, like those of the Anabaptists, are deeply rooted in the teachings found in the Sermon on the Mount.

⁹ The first and perhaps the best example of an individual stepping into this role among Friends was Margaret Fell. A woman of intelligence and talent, and the wife of a respected Judge, she became convinced of the Quaker message after George Fox visited her home, and soon came to be a leader in the movement. She essentially ran the support system for traveling ministers from her home, Swarthmoor Hall, and came to take on a variety of roles in "administrative leadership." She also offers an example of how women were accepted in leadership early in the movement. (For a fascinating biography see, Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism, 2nd Ed., by Isabel Ross, 1984).

¹⁰ Howard Brinton (Friends for 300 Years, p.92) cites a minute from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1714 encouraging Monthly Meetings to appoint elders to meet with ministers to strengthen and guide their ministry. These developments are also chronicled in The History of Quakerism, pp. 218-220. (Elbert Russell, Friends United Press, 1979). The Story of Quakerism (3rd Ed.), pp 142-43. (Elfrida Vipont, Friends United Press, 1977).

¹¹ For a very helpful discussion of these developments on a wider scale, and of their implications for church and society, see Inventing the Nonprofit Sector by Peter Dobkin Hall (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), and his earlier volume, The Organization of American Culture: 1700-1900 (New York University Press, 1984).

¹² For a fascinating study of how and why Quakers became leaders in many industries during the industrial revolution, see Quakers, Morals & Money, by James Walvin. (London, Eng.: John Murray, 1997).

¹³ See the Journal of John Woolman, (Secacus, NJ; Citadel Press, 1975) for the account of these early stages of his life. (See especially pages 11-28.) A Quaker minister traveling under the care of his or her meeting traveled with a "minute", which those visited would write on commenting upon his or her ministry; and the minister would bring that back to the home Meeting for the Elders (and others) to see. Traveling under the care of the Meeting also meant the minister's daily affairs and family would be looked after by the Meeting in his or her absence.

¹⁴ William Penn, writing in No Cross, No Crown (1682), says "True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enable them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it." (Cited in Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting, 1972.) This quote captures as succinctly and eloquently as any Friends' view of the right relationship between worship and service.

¹⁵ An irony here is that, while holding such a position might add to one's status as a "weighty Friend," preparing for that work by formal religious training would have been an undesirable exercise in "creaturely activity." In the 1700's and well into the 1800's, Friends were heavily influenced by the Quietist movement, a spiritual perspective originating in France that was highly suspicious of all intellectual effort or active exercise meant to deepen or give expression to faith. They believed true connection with and expression of God's will came only through quieting one's own passions and intellect, passive contemplation, and letting oneself be moved and directed by the Holy Spirit. Quietist Friends, of whom John Woolman is a good example, therefore looked very skeptically on all training and formal preparation for ministry or religious service of any sort.

¹⁶ One development may suggest the point where this trend becomes significant as well as any other, for it is in the 1930's and 40's the some of the most important of the Friends Schools begin to admit non-Friends for the first time. These institutions that were created to give Friends children a "guarded education" (i.e., apart from the world), now began to allow the non-Quaker children in. There certainly was an acceleration of persons who grew up outside Quakerism becoming members in the 1960's and 70's. The cumulative affect of all this can be seen in the results of a recent survey of a representative sample of the membership of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the largest Quaker judicatory in the U.S. The findings indicate as much as 67% of the current membership are "convinced Friends" (converts); and that as much a half of the membership is new to Quakerism in the last 25 years, the vast majority joining as adults.

¹⁷ See Note #2, above.

¹⁸ Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends (London, Eng.: London Yearly Meeting, 1972) is a collection of quotations about Quakerism selected and compiled by British Friends over many years. It is the complementary volume for their Book of Discipline. As London (now Britain) Yearly Meeting was among the oldest and was (for a long time) the largest Yearly Meeting of Friends, this collection as special weight, and is an important volume on many Quaker bookshelves.

¹⁹ Friends as Leaders, p.9.

²⁰ We might note a parallel theme has appeared in the literature on leadership and management for secular corporations, where the need to personal authenticity, integrity and the capacity to generate trust are being lifted up as key personal characteristics of the most effective leaders. See, for example, Credibility, by James Kouzes and Barry Posner (Jossey-Bass, 1993); or the work of Max Dupree (Leadership Jazz and Leadership is an Art).

²¹ Friends as Leaders, p. 10.

²² Friends as Leaders, p 12.

²³ Quakers and the Use of Power, p.3.

²⁴ Two very interesting examples of struggles around similar issues can be found in “How Alternative Ideas Become Institutions: The Case of Feminist Collectives, by Rebecca Bordt. (PONPO Working Paper #159, 1990), and “The Old Order Amish Steering Committee: A Case Study in Organizational Evolution,” by Marc Olshan (Social Forces, December 1990, 69(2): 603-616. In both these two cases some organizations are found to adopt more hierarchical or bureaucratic decision making structures to be able to act effectively, even if that seems contrary to stated ideals; whereas Quaker congregations (at least) seem to unflinchingly resist anything that even feels like hierarchy, even if that creates organizational paralysis.

²⁵ The Earlham School of Religion was the first such institution, and founded in 1964. There were Quaker faculty in the appropriate fields – Bible, Church History, Theology, etc. – and Quaker students at other seminaries before this; but there was no “Quaker seminary” (*per se*) before this.

²⁶ “The Place of Congregation in the Contemporary American Religious Configuration,” by R. Stephan Warner, (p. 59). In American Congregations, Vol. 2: New Perspectives in the Study of Congregations. Wind, James P. and Lewis, James W. (eds.). Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

²⁷ I have written extensively about these issues elsewhere. See, for instance, "When Management is the Message: Relating Values to Management Practice in Nonprofit Organizations," in Nonprofit Management and Leadership, Vol. 2, 1992. Or, When the Bottom Line is Faithfulness: The Management of Christian Service Organizations, Indiana University Press, 1994. Or, Growing Givers' Hearts: Treating Fundraising as a Ministry (with Rebekah Basinger), Jossey-Bass, 2000.

²⁸ Friends as Leaders, p.3. (See note #2, above.)