Spoken Quaker ministry could be described as responding to the "inward motion." Quaker ministry could also be described as walking the razor's edge. Or we could say that such ministry arises out of and contributes to the primary "Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness."

Even more important than these working definitions is that fact that ministry among Friends has traditionally been understood to be evoked by a "call" from God, so that ministry becomes a "calling" or, to use the Latin form, a "vocation." Most Friends today have experienced the immediate call to speak in a specific Quaker meeting. For many modern unprogrammed Friends, responding to this immediate call to speak is often an important step in the process of "conversion"--that is, the turning of our lives to ever closer and closer attention to and faithful response to the Will of God. Hopefully, this immediate sense of calling takes place each time a person speaks in meeting.

But there is a deeper and more persistent sense of calling to the ministry which has occurred to some Friends throughout Quaker history--and it is still occurring today. We have only to read the journals of earlier as well as more recent Friends to learn of their struggles as they came to recognize and to accept their "vocation" as a minister in a way which paralleled the sense of call experienced by prophets in the Old and New Testaments. Modern unprogrammed Friends who experience this traditional calling and longing to be about the work of God often experience great frustration because there seems to be little or no place for ministry as a vocation in the modern Society of Friends. Some of these people seriously consider joining another religious group which supports and affirms a professional ministry, while others attend Pendle Hill or Earlham School of Religion or a seminary, first of all to satisfy their hunger to engage more fully with the Sacred, and then to prepare for serving in some Quaker institution or other religious organization.

Part of their frustration lies in the fact that we modern Friends value expertise and genius in virtually every field except the spiritual, so that we don't know how to recognize and encourage a person who is spiritually gifted and called to this work. Every generation of Friends, including this one, has had its quota of people who in other cultures might be called budding shamans or seers or medicine men or medicine women. In earlier Quaker eras these budding Quaker shamans were watched over and nurtured and in subtle ways encouraged so that many of them were able to respond to the ever beaconing Call to become a sanctified instrument of the Divine Will.

By the way, I continue to surprise myself when I use the word sanctified, but it is important to re-examine this old Quaker term as we consider the foundation of a truly powerful ministry. When the Call is truly recognized, the budding minister--which could be any or all of us--comes to know, deep in the gut, that we are called to live in that Amazing Reality which was before all words were, and that that Reality wants to
transform us into a profound wholeness (sometimes mis-translated as perfection) The budding minister--and remember, that can include all of us--may have one, or even several profound experiences of transformation, graced empowerment and a deep sense of dedication, but no one of these moments of sanctification (if I may use the term) is final and absolute--there is always more to learn, and we continue to learn and grow as long as we live.

This yearning for conversion of life and manners, this daily and persistent turning and returning to the Light, this unashamed openness for sanctification, and for what earlier Friends called the Inward Work of Christ is, in my experience, the only foundation of an effective and life-changing ministry. Without it, we are simply talking about important--but superficial--techniques of ministry and the mechanisms to insure good ministry. These techniques and mechanisms, in my experience, and, I believe, the experience of the Society of Friends, will always grow rusty and narrow if they are not continually renewed and kept alive by a worshipping community which has an unashamed openness for sanctification--that is, for a profound Divinely restored wholeness (which earlier generations of Friends would have called Christian perfection). The paradox of this sanctification, this living wholeness is that it is not a static, unchanging perfection, but that it is like living on the razor's edge. For me, it is living with Christ as the Radiant Center, in a place beyond words and concepts. When I am able to dwell there I am on the razor's edge because as a human being and as one called to ministry, I must use words and concepts even as I know that the Radiant Center which is our Life is beyond all form and imaging. (We will need to look at several other paradoxical tensions of that blessed razor's edge a little later.)

Now that we have spoken of the worshipping community and the radiant center, we might ask how else we can describe the nature of Quaker worship out of which ministry flows. What is worship and what does it do to us? One way to begin approaching this question is to re-examine some of the old metaphors from our Quaker, Hebraic-Christian experience. Early Friends clearly felt that they had experienced within themselves and their group worship the second covenant spoken of by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They believed that they had, through the prophet like unto Moses of the first covenant, but greater than Moses (Jesus) experienced the transformation of the heart so that they were given a new consciousness and tenderness and sensitivity as well as grace and empowerment and faith (faith, not as a formula of words, but as an inward knowing) and that they were given access to guidance through the Inward Teacher and Prophet, Christ. In addition to this they were given the power to actually follow the way of life revealed and commanded by this Prophet Jesus. They also understood that being together in the same new covenant with others united them all into one body. For them, and for many Friends still today, the metaphor of a gathered meeting being part of the body of Christ was more than a metaphor--it was one way of explaining the bondedness and the invisible connection which the worshippers felt with one another and with the Radiant Center. Other metaphors to explain this amazing experience included being attached to the Vine, Christ, or dwelling together in the Mind of Christ, or sitting together under Jesus, the present and living Teacher.

Another ancient--and still very contemporary way--of describing Quaker worship is simply to say that it is waiting on the Lord. Waiting, in this Quaker use, has many rich layers of meaning which imply total attention to and total dependence upon the Radiant Center. No doubt we have all felt, in a truly gathered and covered meeting, this corporate waiting, which can be amazingly nourishing, even when "nothing" outwardly happens. But of course, a living ministry often does arise out of this deep corporate dependence on God. To paraphrase an ancient Quaker axiom, the purpose of ministry arising out of such a truly waiting meeting, is to take the hearers to the True Teacher, to the Radiant Center, and to leave them there. When the individual worshippers have come to (or been found by) the inward teacher, they may either experience a flow of ideas, insights, knowings, new directions for their lives and ministry--or simply a sweet and nourishing emptiness,
which can also be very healing.

One can also look at Quaker worship as part of the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness, for a significant shift does seem to occur in the midst of the waiting worship. This has been described in many ways, some of them theological, and some phenomenological. For example, many have spoken of experiencing repeated spiritual baptism and communion, and a sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit. I have often described it as an expansion of consciousness beyond the customary individualistic and materialistic focus of our era, so that there comes a relaxation of the boundaries of the ego and of what we normally call the self, giving a sense of melding and blending with those around us and feeling the unity of the radiant center pervading and suffusing all of us, and giving us a sense of unity with the creation extending far beyond the walls of the meeting room.

As we become proficient with this Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness--that is, as we learn to dwell for periods in the Living Stream, the Radiant Center, or what some devout Christians would call being present to the Holy Spirit--at least two significant things happen to us. First, we are given increasing and progressive self-awareness. It is almost as if we can stand back and observe ourselves, discovering more and more about our motives and reaction patterns--and, wondrously, we are given the power gradually to change toward that full wholeness of the image of God which is our heritage. This process can at times seem amazingly easy, or at least organically and harmoniously and synchronistically right, but it can also be a struggle, because when we are truly in the Radiant, Living Center, the Stream, we are also on the razor's edge. In other words, one of the outcomes of our faithful participation in waiting worship is that our self-knowledge, and therefore, our behavior and our aspect or stance toward all circumstances will be more and more in accordance with the narrow but glorious Way taught by Jesus. A second outcome, related to the first, is that we become more able to discern in general, and specifically, that we are more attentive to the inward motions from God.

In such a meeting the "ministry" can be entirely silent as we drink from the living water, or the spoken ministry can come from the depths to encourage one soul present--or the entire meeting--how to go deeper into the Radiant Center or how to amend one's life so that one can go forward more clearly on the path. Sometimes the spoken ministry in such a meeting may gather around a common theme--though this is not at all necessary. Indeed, it may well be that the Spirit calls for several diverse types of messages in order to meet the various needs of those present.

As the 20th century draws to a close, it seems increasingly important to know the difference between the kind of waiting worship we have been describing and worship-sharing. I believe that worship-sharing has been a very important addition to Quakerism, and I encourage it as one important means of spiritual growth and fellowship, but it does serve a different function than does a regular meeting for worship. In worship sharing each individual is encouraged to share thoughts, feelings, responses, and memories, often, though not always, around a common theme. This differs from a meeting for worship in which the same kinds of thoughts, feelings, responses, and memories are present in the minds of many of the worshipers. However, the experienced meeting attender knows that the mind is always full of things which could be shared, we are cautioned to wait and discern the depth from which this motion comes. Various people have written about the tests we can apply in order to know the difference between an ordinary impulse to share even a good insight and the clear inward motion from the Holy Spirit, which comes from a place deep within. We can only pray that those who speak frequently in our meetings have already experienced the two long-term outcomes of waiting worship mentioned earlier, so that as they become ever more skillful in the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness they also come to a fuller awareness of their range of motivations, thus giving them a more precise ability to discern. Paradoxically, it is difficult to make an absolute rule here,
because a person may indeed be moved by the Holy Spirit to share a recent personal experience or insight during a meeting for worship in a way that is very like the sharing in a worship-sharing group. However, I believe that it is important to keep remembering the difference between worship-sharing and the meeting for worship, because there seems to be a subtle and persistent tendency for some meetings to be so full of good sharing that they are blocked or at least hindered from the fundamental deep work which occurs when the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness is fully allowed to take place.

Friends have often described the kind of message which flows out of a gathered and covered meeting as prophetic ministry, that is, ministry which is specifically meant for that gathering (or even for a single person in that meeting). Furthermore, the term prophetic ministry also implies that the message comes from God, or some would say from the Holy Spirit, from the Divine Mystery, from the Radiant Center, or, as some Friends still say today, from Christ, our living prophet and teacher. Such ministry often carries with it a sense of awe, responsibility, and humility on the part of the speaker-- even though it can also include a sense of humor and joy as well. According to this definition, all that is rightly spoken in a gathered meeting can be called prophetic ministry, that is, a ministry which is tailor-made for that group of people in that moment of time. I also find it helpful to refer to two sub-categories of prophetic ministry identified years ago by Howard Brinton, priestly ministry and teaching ministry.

Howard pointed out that priestly ministry is an important form of prophetic ministry which reaches out to people at a time of crisis or a life passage, like illness, bereavement, marriage, graduation, or leaving home for the first time or entering a retirement home. There are many stories of Quaker ministers of old--and some more recent ones--who gave powerful and helpful ministry of this sort, sometimes without outwardly knowing the circumstances to which they were ministering. Some traditional ministers of the old Quaker style were known to be especially gifted when preaching at funerals, for example. Such "priestly" and healing ministry was often an important part of the prophetic ministry which took place in the opportunities or "sittings" which ministers of the old style often called to hold in individual homes. Even if some of us may not like the term "priestly" we can recognize the importance of such a prophetic ministry which brings compassion, healing, inspiration and meaning to people going through various life passages. It is useful to remember that a message of this kind, whether given in a large meeting for worship or a small one, might be intended, through the guidance of the Spirit, for just one person or a very few people present.

Howard Brinton's other sub-category of prophetic ministry is teaching ministry, which was once far more common in unprogrammed meetings than it is today, for we are less tolerant of long sermons, and we are often a little suspicious of people who seem to use a message in meeting as a teaching device. Furthermore, many contemporary Friends meetings use forums and lectures as the appropriate place for teaching ministry to occur, even though not every member attends such functions. We might say that modern teaching ministry usually occurs by invitation only, which reminds us of the traditional Quaker objection to professional ministers who preach only to those who invite them to do so, as I am doing tonight! I hope we won't forget that some Friends may indeed be gifted and called to include stories and examples and explanations in their spoken ministry in a truly prophetic way that is made especially memorable by the witness and power of immediate inspiration in the midst of the expanded, numinous consciousness of a gathered and covered meeting.

Of course, these kinds of ministry can be abused, so that even a dear and well-intentioned speaker can, through sentimentality or brilliant intellectualism, quickly muddle or tire a meeting, distracting it from the primary work of resting in the Radiant Center. Probably most of us here are aware of meetings which have lost members and attenders as a result of such ministry. Because of this, and for the "honor of Truth," I believe that we have an obligation to remind those who speak frequently in our meetings continually to
review their skill in the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness and the discerning of the inward motion. Many generations of experienced Quaker ministers have spoken of learning to attend to the inward motion, sometimes described as the "still small voice." In the beginning it can be so subtle and delicate as it first rises up through the clear pool of consciousness that it certainly does not seem like a motion or a voice. It is simply a quiet knowing with no fireworks, so that it can easily be confused with other thoughts and impulses if we are not attentive. Sometimes, the Spirit pushes the inward motion up through the layers of consciousness so that we can not ignore it, and the Spirit overcomes our resistance to it by causing us to quake, or at least to cause rapid breathing and heart beat, which are often regarded as the signs that one must speak in meeting. But, as we become experienced in recognizing and responding to the inward motion, the Spirit does not need to expend so much energy on us; we become more able to discern the power of the Divine Urgency of the true inward motion and to discern which other thoughts and "motions"—no matter how good and worthy—are to be left alone, or at least not be spoken as ministry. Of course, the inward motion, or the inward knowing which is another way of describing the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is not just an esoteric skill for those who speak in our meetings. Quakerism is about, among other things, the fact that this guidance through the inward motion is available to every one of us, in the daily affairs of our lives, as well as our special ministry in family, meeting community, and world to which each of us is called.

How can these vital Quaker skills be taught? Or, if they defy teaching, as some believe, how can they be caught—or at least absorbed by osmosis? In classic Quakerism, and in some meetings still today, the learning began in infancy, with children sitting with their parents throughout the meeting for worship, and also experiencing regular rhythms of waiting worship in the home and school. Like Native American children, Quaker children learned by experience that silence can be a vital and nourishing dimension of life. However, it is important that parents and teachers be attentive to children's questions about the use of silence, and that they be able to interpret what is happening.

Obviously, childhood training is only a start—and even in classic Quakerism, as is true today, many people came to Quakerism as mature adults. Many of the journals give some account of the mentoring and apprenticeship which has played an important role in each generation. Often the mentoring was sought out by the concerned young person, but it is obvious that there were wise women and men of all ages quick to respond to that yearning for nurture and advice which comes from and leads to the Radiant, Living Center. The word "opportunity" was often used to describe these formal or informal sessions. Sometimes they occurred without pre-arrangement, spontaneously, in the midst of a visit or chance encounter. Sometimes the young person would take the initiative for the opportunity, and sometimes the experienced minister or elder would follow a leading to speak to the young person after meeting or to seek an opportunity at some other time. In these opportunities, the young seekers not only received advice and encouragement, as important as these might be, but also they had the practical experience of being present with a person skilled in the Quaker technology of living attentively in the Divine Presence, the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness and discerning the inward motion.

Thus, with each opportunity, they were learning by osmosis just what the Real Presence actually feels like. The learning possibilities of an opportunity are potentially very significant, because the Power of the Presence often seems much greater at such a time, so that the less-experienced Friend can have a greater chance to experience and identify the shifts in consciousness which are an important part of Quaker praxis. Let me be quick to add that it was not only young people who sought out these opportunities—Friends of all ages, including myself, have benefitted from dwelling in the Living Presence of these opportunities. The practice of opportunities or sittings or "family visits" was a much more common part of the Quaker culture than is true today, although I am happy that they are being somewhat revived. In other words, in an earlier
era, a typical Quaker would have experienced many, many opportunities with a number of different people during a lifetime. This was an important part of what today we would call their continuing education. This continuing education also included— and still includes—daily practice of reading, prayer, and contemplation. If the developing Friend were asked to accompany a traveling minister in local opportunities or on a trip to other meetings, there would be many more occasions to experience the shifting levels of consciousness and many chances to test personal discernment in connection with the leadings of the more experienced Friend.

How can we encourage the learning and teaching of these Quaker skills today, especially for those called to minister? To be honest, the main work is still the Work of God in the human heart, though we can help to open the way for Divine Grace through prayer and through great yearning. Then those who have some experience of the Quaker technology in their personal daily practice and in their group experience need to seek one another out as Friends of old used to do, for times of dwelling together in the deep places of the spirit, as a form of continuing education and growth. Spiritual friendships have been and can be one important way to do this. Spiritual mentoring, though not very common in our time, is now becoming more available than it used to be, for a growing number of Friends are now available and are being sought out as mentors, spiritual nurturers, or spiritual directors. Many people in our time have been helped to grow through prayer groups or worship-fellowship groups. The modern counterpart of the old meeting of ministers and elders—often called the worship and ministry committee—can become, like the old meeting for ministers and elders at its best, a place of such deep centered worship that its members can use it as a kind of touchstone for the Quaker skills of dwelling in the nourishing Radiant Center and recognizing the inward motion.

Hopefully members of Worship and Ministry committees will be attentive to those who speak in meeting, and be quick to sense such people's yearning for more fellowship and accountability in relation to spoken ministry. Since most contemporary unprogrammed meetings no longer follow the old Quaker practice of recognizing and "recording" the gift of ministry, those who speak in our meetings are much more on their own, in an individualistic sense, than was true in classic Quakerism. Thus, it could be possible that a contemporary Friend could be a frequent speaker in Friends meetings for many years without ever experiencing any of the continuing education and accountability which was once the case when every recorded minister was expected to meet with the local meeting of ministers and elders at least four times a year, as well as with the quarterly and yearly meeting sessions of ministers and elders. It may be neither appropriate nor wise to go back to the old system, but perhaps way might be found so that our contemporary "public Friends"—that is, those who speak frequently in our meetings—can be given occasional opportunities to meet with their peers, so that they can explore the difficulties of the art or the technology or the craft of following the inward motion while walking the razor's edge. It might also be helpful, at such occasional gatherings, to read and ponder together the old advices and queries for ministers and elders (or some modern equivalent).

It seems especially important for the person experiencing the call to ministry to find a spiritual friend or mentor, someone with whom it is possible to sit in deep silence before God as well as to stay accountable and to test leadings, and to explore what it means to live on the razor's edge of ministry. Ideally, this person would be member of the local worship and ministry group, but don't give up if you can not find such a person there; there may be someone else in the meeting, or that person may exist in a nearby meeting, or you may have to seek someone who lives a hundred miles away. But a right spiritual friend is somewhere to be found for every seeker and for every person who feels called into ministry. Actually, as one becomes more experienced, opportunities for finding spiritual friends and spiritual peers tend to increase, so that one called to ministry gradually finds oneself discovering a network of kindred souls, with increasing opportunities for "opportunities." It is as if those called to ministry are often drawn to opportunities with many people, as if we
become a part of a vast process of cross-fertilization of the Spirit throughout the entire Society of Friends,
and far beyond. It is as if we come to know that we are given essential nourishment and energy from such
opportunities when we dwell together with another in the deep places of God. This is not only a part of our
continuing education in the Quaker technology, it becomes a part of our work of sharing the reality and
availability of the technology of the Living Gospel, even as it becomes as necessary to us as our daily food.
But it is still important to have one or a very few spiritual friends or peers or mentors with whom one is
accountable and with whom one can explore the ever-changing issues of the razor's edge.

Before looking at some of these razor's edge issues, I need to speak about the "minister's belly," a term which
came to me, when, as a young man, I became aware of the love radiating as an invisible though palpable
energy from the abdomen of some ministers of the old style. One of the sure tests of a call to speak in
meeting is to sense whether love--agape--is truly "the first motion," as John Woolman once said. I have since
discovered that many people have the minister's belly (which of course has nothing to do with size) even
though they seldom if ever speak in meeting. Just as we are all ministers (though only a few are called to
spoken ministry during any meeting), so I believe we are all called to develop the minister's belly, radiating
love in the ministry of caring and service and secret prayer of our daily lives.

But back to the razor's edge. Spoken ministry which comes from the radiant center generally carries with it a
sense of authority which the hearer can recognize--it is an authority which does not depend on the expertise
or education or eloquence of the speaker, but which flows from the Source of the message, however halting
or eloquent it may be. How easy it is for human willfulness and pride and our own need for importance to
subtly mingle with the rightful authority appropriate to spoken ministry! But at the same time, those whose
ministry flows from the Radiant Center also speak with humility, because they know from whence the power
comes. If one walks this razor's edge mechanically, it is possible to fall off on either the side of too much, or
wrongly motivated authority, or too much, or wrongful humility. In the same way, the razor's edge balances
the call, of especially some ministering Friends, to be an authoritative and persuasive teacher, while at the
same time being always pliable and teachable in the Master's hand--and also being responsive to and
teachable by elders and ordinary Friends.

Another razor's edge issue is the balance between waiting and boldness, that is, the balance between being
careful not to speak or act ahead of the Guide and a determination not to delay obedience to the Guide. This
balance between reticence and boldness is often the mark of a powerful minister, who may sometimes be
silent for several meetings in a row, and then speak with great authority. There are occasions when timing
means everything, when what seems like boldness and quickness is called for, because the opening for that
specific service is very short. There are other times when the circumstance seems to call for a response, a
message, yet the inward witness tells the ministering Friend, to remain silent, against all outward logic. Or
the ministering Friend may have a clear inward revelation, a sure inward knowing of just what that meeting
needs to hear, and yet the Inward Witness still says, "Be Still and trust me to take care of this in some other
way than thy speaking to it!" These razor's edge issues can seem very complicated if we try to sort them out
mechanically and rationally. If, however, we keep up our continuing education in the Quaker technology and
faithfully live in the Radiant Center, walking the razor's edge becomes a natural and wholesome way to live--
we become as easily skillful as a tightrope walker, remembering that the impossible narrow way of which
Jesus spoke becomes more and more possible to those who have experienced the New Covenant. But, as a
woman minister of the old style before my time in Ohio once said, "It don't get easy!" We do need to stay
alert and always be ready for new learnings which may make the razor's edge even narrower and sharper as
we become ever more experienced and faithful.

We keep learning, for example, about the ego. The Radiant Center, in our form of waiting and contemplative
worship reveals gradually--or in unexpected, recurring cycles over the years, new boundaries and dimensions and realities of the self, revealing what some spiritual authorities call the "false self" which has colored, more than we had realized, our understanding of our self, of the reality around us, and even of our ministry. This knowledge need not cause us to hate the self and call it evil as some have done, but it does cause us simply to be aware of things in ourselves which we gradually come to see stand in the way of our ministry and true growth in God. So we are called faithfully to walk the razor's edge between recognizing the ego, the self, as a sacred and holy instrument of God, and at the same time recognizing the often progressively revealed false self which is to be left behind, or at least re-grown more closely toward the image of God in which we were created.

Perhaps the most important ministry of all is the totally silent ministry. Some of you have heard me tell the story of how I, as a frequent and apparently valued speaker in Friends meetings, had to go through a period of not speaking in meetings for some weeks or months about twenty years ago. This was frustrating, because I was often given an inward knowing about just what a given meeting needed to hear, but if I spoke without the clear inward motion, it was worse than if I had not spoken at all. Then I remembered reading Ann Branson's description of this state in her Journal and references to it in other journals as well. So I patiently endured until I discovered the power of the silent and invisible ministry. Eventually I humbly realized that my spoken ministry had depended, all along, on the faithful silent ministry of often inconspicuous but devout folk who rarely if ever spoke in meeting. These women and men would not have understood if I had complimented them on being masters of the Quaker technology of shifting levels of consciousness and the secret of prayerful presence. In fact, they would probably have been embarrassed and confused by my language. But, with all their humility, they were exercising the technology with great skill in a way which made it possible for fools like me to speak. And so I humbly began to learn and practice this way of secret and invisible prayerful ministry, which at its most powerful, is simply a wordless radiation of the divine love in all directions. Fortunate is that meeting which has such inconspicuous and silent, radiating souls within its midst, for their faithful presence helps not only to raise up a living spoken ministry, but also to encourage the gathered and covered quality of the worship out of which the ministry flows. And fortunate is that meeting in which those who speak are, at the same time, also practitioners of the invisible and silent ministry.