Finding Our Way Forward Together:  
The Story of a 21st Century Traveling Minister  

by Maurine Pyle

Part 1: My View from Firbank Fell

While on a private pilgrimage to northwest England several years ago, I was moved to climb Firbank Fell, the hill where the great spiritual movement of Quakerism began. The historical marker said that in 1652 one thousand people had gathered there to hear a sermon by George Fox, a young itinerant preacher. I wondered, as I looked around, why so many people had climbed the steep hill to hear him? Later I discovered that they had come to the market fair at Sedbergh, a nearby village, looking for work at the hiring fair. When they heard that Fox would be preaching on the following day at a church at Firbank Fell, they climbed the hill to hear him. Surely many of them went out of curiosity, yet among them were spiritual seekers. Ordinary people such as yeomen, shepherds, weavers and serving girls, came up the hill bearing a hunger of some kind.

The stone church proved too small to handle the great crowd. George Fox spoke from a huge rock outcropping, now called Fox's Pulpit, while his listeners gathered below inside a natural amphitheatre. Historical reflections from that day tell us that he preached a Gospel sermon of such power that the people were electrified. When they heard his vital message that “Christ has come to teach his people himself,” (1) some acknowledged their own spiritual gifts by hearing and heeding God’s call. On that day a portion were “gathered as in a net” (2) and experienced a change of direction, becoming part of a renewed apostolic ministry, and followers of George Fox.

As I stood on Fox's Pulpit, my eyes traveled westward over the endless Yorkshire hills until I could see, in my mind’s eye, a tall white meetinghouse shining in the distance. I was seeing our yearly meeting gathering place on Quaker Lane on the Illinois prairie.

Suddenly I understood that we 21st century Friends are the direct heirs of the original vision of the early Friends of England. When Fox saw “a great people to be gathered,” (3) he was speaking about us.

At Firbank Fell a brave group of men and women became valiant traveling ministers, who, upon hearing the Gospel message, took off to share it in distant places in the world. We know that a powerful religious movement was born on that day, carrying those ordinary people to places they never intended to go. If we 21st century American Friends are the remnants of this great wave of Christian faith, how are we fulfilling the founding vision of George Fox? What is the meaning of our Quaker faith today?
In America today our sense of spiritual fellowship in Liberal meetings, the feeling of belonging to the same tribe, is diminishing. We no longer live in the same communities, and we come from diverse faith traditions. Our cultural values are no longer entwined at the roots, as were those of our founders. As a body we share less genetic and cultural memory of what it means to be Quakers. Different viewpoints often prevent us from looking in the same direction to find a point of convergence. We hold beliefs ranging from Buddhism to non-theism to Christianity, or we may simply be ethical humanists.

Just imagine a mixture of wild seeds cast into a single plot of land, producing a profusion of color. A wide variety of plants all blooming together symbolize our present condition in the Religious Society of Friends. Discerning which is a wildflower and which is a weed is not easy. We are living a great experiment of religious diversity.

What do we have in common now? Unprogrammed Friends often share a mystical way of knowing and a deep love of silence. They uphold the testimonies of simplicity, peace, equality, integrity and community by honoring them with their lives. These Quaker values attracted many seekers to Quaker meetings, keeping them connected to the traditions of Quakerism. Yet it is also true that 21st century Quaker meetings have become more like independent churches without a strong link between them. Some do not have any direct contact with neighboring meetings, resulting in isolation and stagnation. A small percentage of the members may participate in wider Quaker groups, leaving the majority at home without any direct connection.

As I have traveled across the United States, I have discovered discontent and troubled silence in many meetings. Spiritual hunger has led people to join Friends meetings seeking after spiritual depth. Sometimes that hunger leads them away again when they do not find it. Newcomers may find that we cannot explain our core beliefs or that we tend to suppress discussion of our religious principles for fear of arousing conflict. People who have a limited understanding of basic Quaker traditions have replaced the solid Quaker elders whom I encountered when I first attended a Quaker meeting. Who is helping to shape the contours of our life as Friends today?

In these times, I rarely hear Friends any longer referring to the founding vision of Quakers and the core Christian beliefs upon which our life is grounded. Quakers of old were not intolerant of differing points of view, but they had their own place to stand.

Jesus’ message was interpreted by Friends to be universal and inclusive based on the message “Love one another.” (4) Early Friends were a community of people who shared the same set of Christian beliefs and practices. These communal values have been largely lost in our era. Now we have a diverse set of patterns. What are we teaching our children about our faith?

Today the chief characteristic of many liberal meetings is intellectual independence. For some newcomers, a Quaker meeting may appear to be a place to meet people who share their particular political viewpoint. In recent years the search for a common faith practice has often been replaced by an unspoken doctrine of individualism. Rather than being
willing to labor to find common ground, differences are usually suppressed in order to keep an uneasy peace. When an important issue arises, the hidden differences are often revealed resulting in open conflict.

One example of a commonly suppressed conflict, which I have witnessed in many meetings, is between wounded people who have left fundamentalist Christian churches and Liberal Christian Friends. The former Christians are sometimes troubled by hearing Christ-centered messages offered in the meeting for worship, and their temperamental reactions cause the Christians to be silent. When there is no open discussion of these theological differences, conflicts become an underground fire, quietly burning until triggered by an event or person.

When these eruptions occur within a monthly meeting, it is time to call for a midwife. The spiritual midwife is someone invited into the community who can serve as a guide, coach or healer. The role of the midwife is to initiate the laboring process and then to leave the remaining work to be completed by the community. Laboring is an old Quaker term, which has fallen into disuse. In the spiritual sense, laboring refers to the willingness to work face-to-face to solve a problem or dispute with the understanding that God will find an opening. This process is only one part persuasion; it is equally listening to one another’s differences and allowing the Spirit to open a new direction until the Truth emerges. Friends call the new outcome being sought “the third way”.

A spiritual midwife, either male or female, is someone who has the capacity to hold the tension of a conflict and inspire trust from all sides disputing an issue. As hearts and minds become engaged in the tension of laboring, the midwife remains detached, holding the center. He is able to stand beside the participants and is not swayed in either direction. He makes candid observations and does not direct the action, except as a guide or helper. The midwife acts as an emissary of the Spirit, calling the community into a new condition.

Traveling ministers are often spiritual midwives. They are invited into Quaker communities and are given a front row seat on what is happening at that moment. They also carry news and ideas from one meeting to another as they travel. Traveling ministers who go from meeting to meeting serve as a vital connecting link.

As a means of calling attention to the importance of traveling ministry, I will tell you some stories from my own experiences in this form of ministry mostly while serving as the Field Secretary for Illinois Yearly Meeting. I was surprised to be called into this ministry while at the end of my service as clerk of the yearly meeting. During the following three years, my spiritual journey was filled with rich experiences and difficult trials. Though I did not have to cross deep rivers or trudge through cold winter forests like the Early Friends who were traveling ministers, I did face struggles that required courage and steadfast faith.
Part 2: Spiritual Midwife Stories

When I first started traveling in the four-state territory of Illinois Yearly Meeting, which is composed of about 500 active members, I thought I had a pretty good grasp of the scope of the work. To my mind, small meetings would need help to grow larger, and large meetings would need conflict resolution training. All would need retreats and other Quakerism education resources to develop the skills to be a self-sustaining community. I quickly discovered that I was wrong. The greatest need for my services usually fell into the unnamed category of pastoral care. What I mean by pastoral care is offering compassionate listening and prayer for a member when a problem has not been clearly defined. I was very surprised to find that interpersonal and personal issues in the community would call so heavily on my time. Two previous field secretaries chuckled as they watched me on my journey of discovery. They had walked in those moccasins before me and knew that I would eventually understand that the true work of the field secretary was community healing.

Quakers hold themselves to a high standard of behavior, so it was not easy to admit to that personal difficulties even existed. Often Quakers give the impression that their lives are above the fray because they are committed to non-violence and the Peace Testimony.

(5) Conflict is considered “not nice” or dangerous, so it is suppressed. The meeting family may be concealing a gay person or someone with mental illness, a broken marriage relationship or alcoholism, among other issues. Frequently I discovered these concerns through the back door. People began to trust me, as I made recurring visits to their meetings, resulting in disclosure of problems, which were neglected or concealed. Often issues emerged in unusual ways, surprising both the community and me. I found hidden pastoral care needs in nearly every Quaker community that I visited.

Traditional Quaker practice offers pastoral support through the meeting’s Ministry and Counsel Committee, which is a group of seasoned elders. In our yearly meeting the most experienced elders, those who grew up in Quaker families, have died or moved away.

Our current population of Friends mostly grew up in another faith tradition where a priest or pastor provided care for members in trouble. We were not trained from birth with the skills to support one another in times of crisis, and we may even feel we have no business interfering. What I mean by pastoral care is offering compassionate listening and prayer for a member when a problem has not been clearly defined. I am not speaking of offering the equivalent of professional therapeutic services. What is needed in the beginning is assistance with discerning the depth of the problem and direction toward solving it. As a result of the community’s fearfulness about interfering in personal matters of members, many issues are left festering and untended.

If a member is experiencing a physical ailment, Quaker communities are quick to arrange
meals for the family and visits to the hospital. We are often frustrated and incapacitated when trying to respond to the hot issues. We tend to hear about problems in a marriage after one member files for divorce. In the case of suicide or mental illness, silence often envelopes the community. If there is no appointed ministry committee because the community is so tiny, all of the business of the meeting is handled as a body with no privacy possible.” The result is that important pastoral care issues are often neglected. In these situations a visit from a traveling minister can offer primary support to a small community. Here are some stories from my travels to illuminate this problem.

On a traveling visit I met with the leaders of a meeting who for years had been deadlocked over the issue of gay marriage. They had settled into a dark silence, walking around the “elephant in the living room.” Their healthy development as a community had ground to a halt. People began slowly leaving the meeting, and eventually no one wanted to volunteer for service. The initial request for my services came from the Nominating Committee asking for help in envisioning their future. I proposed a series of retreats to address the conditions they were avoiding.

The first retreat focused on the spiritual life of the meeting. One exercise, which I call the “talking timeline,” is often helpful to determine a path to the future by reviewing the past history of the community. We created a circle on the floor out of twine representing the timeline since the meeting was founded. Then I handed out index cards to each of the participants asking them to write the year when they first arrived at the meeting. Each person, from the founders to the newest attender, was invited to place the card on the floor, and took a turn standing on the circle and telling the story of their first visits as a newcomer. We listened to the stories of the meeting’s rise and fall over time and all the differing perceptions people had. From this exercise we drew a fuller picture of their communal history.

At the end of the retreat we settled into a deep silence. When the clerk rose to close the worship, he noticed that a woman had also risen. He quietly sat down acknowledging her need to speak. She appeared to be in a trance as she began walking slowly around the circle on the floor. Halfway round she folded at the waist and began writhing like a woman in labor. I had heard of this phenomenon, reenacting childbirth, from the early writings of Friends. It was shocking to witness. An older woman gently approached her and held out her hands in a gesture of healing energy and protection without touching. The woman in labor straightened up and completed her walk to the end of the circle where the hemp was tied in a bow. She leaned over and untied the knot pointing one strand outward and another inward. I felt that she was symbolically teaching us that the meeting needed to open to the future and to heal the past. When I met with her privately afterwards, she was apparently shaken by the experience and embarrassed by her actions. I told her she had been acting on behalf of the Spirit, using her body as the messenger and the message.

Following two more retreats, it was revealed that there were two hidden gay people in the meeting and the gay marriage issue was the tip of the iceberg. At a subsequent retreat
a woman told her story of being suicidal and afraid to ask the community for help. It was also revealed that a mentally ill young man was not being accepted in the meeting because of his strange behavior. He later requested membership, and was mentored wisely by another man who had learned to live with his own mental illness. Over a long period of receiving gifts from other traveling elders from the yearly meeting, many hidden issues were revealed and healed. The presenting problem of gay marriage was eventually reconciled. Now the meeting is a welcoming community for all people.

As I became more confident in offering ministry, I also became bolder. Not waiting for an invitation, I began initiating visits to meetings. On one occasion I felt led to visit a monthly that was known as an insular group and mostly college professors. Their habit for years had been to gather for an hour of silent meditation at a campus interfaith center, and then to exit immediately thereafter. There wasn’t even a coffee pot. Aware that my planned visit would coincide with Easter Sunday, I made an unusual request of the clerk, asking if I could conduct a foot washing ceremony in the tradition of Jesus and his apostles. He affirmed my idea saying that he thought the group would enjoy it. Most people were not forewarned. I wondered if he was right. I decided to take the risk.

During the meeting for worship, the clerk invited me to begin speaking because there they had been silent for a long time, offering no vocal ministry. I read from the Book of John, chapter 13, (6) which describes Jesus kneeling before each apostle and washing his feet. Near me sat a small boy facing me and looking into my eyes deeply without blinking. I said that he and I were reverencing each other and that most of us are unable to do it in the way that a child can. Jesus was also showing reverence for his apostles by demonstrating servant leadership in the washing of the feet. He was saying that there would be no hierarchy among them, no one greater than the other. In their ministry, all would be servants to one another. I reminded them that this is a symbol of our Quaker meeting.

Then, without a murmur, the adults, teens and children filed down to the kitchen to find vessels of varying sizes, filling them with warm water and carrying them upstairs to the meeting area. I taught them a simple foot massage technique and invited them to pair up and wash each other’s feet. I was inviting them to use touch to help them come into a more intimate community. Everyone settled into a blissful state. A father washed his small son’s feet. A woman kneeled in front of a woman seated in a wheelchair, offering gentle touch. A feeling of joy and peace filled the room as we reverenced each other with this simple gesture of humility. Their clerk had been so wise in knowing that this ritual of love was what the community needed most. Their perceived starvation of time was only an illusion, as no one hurried out the door.

Quaker communities are constantly changing. I once heard a meeting compared to a seashore where the waves sweep up shells and sea animals and pull them out to sea. Another wave comes in to deposit more shells, and so it goes. A static member of the meeting may not notice this wave action until a really big wave of change hits. Once I came to visit a Quaker community that was slowly ebbing. Only a few elders remained, and they wondered if they would be the last. Suddenly they were “invaded” by a group
of young dynamic people who wanted to be Quakers. Among them were a few experienced Friends, but the majority were newcomers from a variety of faith backgrounds. They were intelligent, compassionate, and sincere folks in their 30’s. Their new energy was welcomed until it began to rub up against the elders who thought they “knew better.” Secular ways of organizing the meeting began to creep into the structure; like organizational development practices. Important tasks were being forgotten or done differently.

A highly respected elder was hurt and angry about being ignored, so I visited the meeting without being invited. One angry episode had actually broken the members into small isolated groups, but no one was talking about the problem in an open manner. They smiled and suppressed the conflict. I call this condition *terminal niceness*, and Quakers suffer greatly from it; people feel it is not nice to call attention to conflicts in the community. It is not nice to get angry. But tamping the fire down will not eliminate it.

The flames just travel underground for a while and then pop up elsewhere.

I offered “opportunities” spiritual conversations] to anyone who would meet with me individually. I actually stayed in the home of the elder who was being shunned, so that people had to come to her door to pick me up. As the week wore on, I began to get the picture of what had happened. I was invited to meet with their Ministry and Counsel Committee. I listened and then told them that a ceremony of reconciliation was needed. A month later they scheduled a meeting, with an outside facilitator [an elder from a neighboring meeting] serving as mediator to hear the concerns of all. The reconciliation meeting was reportedly emotionally difficult for everyone. Yet, in a few weeks, they were able to begin again working out their struggles.

Not all of these *midwifing* experiences have happy endings, but they do offer an opening for dialog. Struggling with your closest intimates in community is a form of loving your enemy. Jesus meant for us to work out our conflicts with our family and friends, and certainly it is in this context of intimate relationships that we experience our most difficult challenges.

**Ministry of Reconciliation**

Peacemaking first begins in the meeting family and in the lives of its members. So often we Quakers cast our nets far out into the world when we seek to heal the causes of aggression. I start my work closer to home. As Jesus said to the apostles when they were not catching any fish, “Cast your nets on the other side.” (7) I catch more fish that way by opening the conversations about the hidden conflict.

As a traveling minister I am often given access to closely held secrets, sometimes willingly but more often through a process I call a ministry of reconciliation. Usually it begins this way, someone calls me to request a workshop on what they term “Quaker process.” I have found this terminology to be a code phrase for “a family fight going on in the meeting.” People are too polite to name it, so they blame it on improper business process. Quakers
are excellent conflict avoiders. I have a theory that most of us joined the Religious Society of Friends because it looked so peaceful. My prescription regarding conflict is that there is no way around it; we have to go through it.

A few years ago I received a request to offer a retreat for a troubled meeting in a nearby state. When the request was for a Quaker process retreat, I suspected a hidden conflict needed healing. Since no one in the meeting stepped forth to help me design the retreat, I told my contact that I would simply bring my talking stick and open a conversation. My motto is “Speak softly and carry a talking stick.” I also follow this dictum -- *To know that you don’t know is the beginning of wisdom.*

When I arrived I felt the tenseness in the group. Smiles were pasted on with great care, and eye contact was limited. I sensed their uneasiness in being together. I began by introducing the talking stick as a means of free and open communication, which Native Americans have used to encourage truth sharing. Only the person who holds the stick may speak and the others are encouraged to listen deeply. I reminded them that the talking stick couldn’t be used to express anger or blame, only truth. They could only make “I” statements.

The query I posed was, “What suffering of your heart do you need to share with your meeting?” The group centered into an uneasy silence. As we passed the stick for several hours in surrounding silence, we heard the hidden pain in the community. Some women began weeping. One of the founders, whom I had been told was an angry resistor, softened and showed her deeper nature to the group. An emotional shift occurred as members saw her in a clearer light. She had been standing in the way of change because she felt she was the holder of the founding vision. At the close of the ceremony the group had moved to a place of reconciliation without actually naming the conflicts. We closed the circle with gratitude for a new truth revealed and a deepening of Spirit.

Later, in response to their request to learn more about Quaker process, I invited my companion—elder to lead a discussion. At that time she was serving as the clerk of her yearly meeting and was well suited to the task. From the outset of her presentation, some of the meeting members began to attack her verbally with intellectual sharpness. I discovered that many of them were leaders in local, national and international organizations. I allowed the aggressive behavior to continue for a while and then I stopped the action, asking them to notice how differently they were speaking to one another than they had in the morning session. They appeared shocked. One said, “This is how we speak to one another in meeting for business.” Laying down our secular experience as leaders is often difficult. Assuming the role of servant leader in a Quaker setting asks us to do symbolic foot washing. Jesus was the role model for this type of leadership, which instructs to act as the humblest, not the smartest person in the room.

What did we learn in our time together? As a spiritual midwife, I offered them the opportunity to look deeply in the mirror at their reflection as a community. I had come without any prior knowledge of their conflicts, yet we were able to uncover and heal them. One year later I happened to meet one of their leaders at a conference. She said that the
meeting community had experienced a turning point at the retreat.

When I enter a Quaker community, my intention is to discover what is really happening there and help the community see it clearly. This is one of the benefits of traveling ministry. If we are invited into the inner circle, we can hold up a mirror for what needs healing in the Quaker community. A request for a retreat is often more than a desire for education on a particular topic. I have found that often it indicates an unspoken need for reconciliation in the community.

Part 3: Traveling Ministry, Now and Again

Our Quaker forbears knew that God had called them, and their response was to travel among Friends with a Spirit-filled message. Once upon a time traveling ministers were like blood circulating through the Quaker body. Reaching back to the very beginning of the Religious Society of Friends, we have the record of Margaret Fell and her two daughters, who traveled the length and breadth of England on horseback, 1000 miles in all, visiting and encouraging groups of Friends.

Rufus Jones, a 20th century traveling minister from Maine, writes below about how his own ministry was influenced by his aunts and uncles who frequently traveled as Quaker ministers in the 18th century in America:

“My Aunt Peace made many journeys to remote regions in America and brought back vast stores of information and wisdom. Uncle Eli and Aunt Sybil, who in my youth were among the foremost living Quakers in gift and power of ministry, went back and forth like spiritual shuttles, now weaving strands of truth into our lives and now and again weaving in some far away spot of the earth. It was a very common and ordinary matter for New England Friends to drive to “the Provinces,” especially Nova Scotia, on religious visits, and as soon as the railroads made travel easy and rapid, there was an almost unbroken stream of circulating ministry. (8)

Aunt Peace, who was traveling during the 19th century in a horse drawn buggy, was simply following a great tradition of the hundreds of Quaker women who regularly traversed the colonies and/or British Isles in the 18th century. (9)

The long tradition of meetings sending forth traveling ministers and recording ministries fell into disuse in the 20th century. Perhaps the suppression of this organic process of raising up ministers within Friends meetings resulted from more convinced Friends becoming Quakers, bringing their cultural prejudices about ministry with them. One common cry against the acknowledgment of public ministers is that, “We are all ministers.” That is true, but equally true is the special calling to become traveling ministers that some are asked to bear on behalf of the community. The difference is
defined in a letter from Stephanie Crumley-Effinger, Presiding Clerk, West Richmond Monthly Meeting to South Bend Meeting regarding the transfer of the recorded ministry of Ann Miller (June 21, 2007): (10)

Our understanding is that while God grants spiritual gifts to all members—the universal ministry—some members are given gifts for public ministry and are called to use these not only within, but also beyond, their local and yearly meeting. Recording of such gifts of public ministry is a means of identification and nurture of these gifts by the wider body, and of holding the person publicly accountable for their faithful use. It does not confer a title or special status but a particular responsibility.

Traveling ministry in Illinois Yearly Meeting has a long history reaching back to the 19th century. Although the yearly meeting was geographically broad, ministers were called forth by the Spirit and traveled widely. Traveling ministry was the “tie that binds,” as the old hymn goes, which linked dispersed and isolated Quaker meetings. Most Quakers prior to the 20th century lived in rural areas in our yearly meeting. When a traveling minister answered a call into service, the elders, and indeed the entire community, were being called forth by Spirit to serve the body as a whole.

One of the most famous traveling ministers from our region was Jonathan Plummer, who later founded Friends General Conference. Here is a minute for Jonathan W. Plummer, who resided in Chicago and traveled great distances on behalf of his home meeting in East Jordan Meeting, which was located in Sterling, Illinois -- west of Chicago where he resided: (11)

To all whom it may concern. Our friend Jonathan W. Plummer having expressed a desire to visit some meeting within the limits of Westfield Monthly Meeting in Ohio, and if way opens to appoint some meetings outside of our membership. This will certify that he is recorded minister in unity with us.

In testimony whereof we a part of East Jordan Monthly Meeting subscribe our names this 24th day of 8th mo. 1877.

Martha John
Elida John
Sarah H.
John Mark Penrose
Lydia K. Penrose

Recorded ministers and traveling ministry had already disappeared when in 1983 Lucy Talley [now Davenport] received her calling to visit all of the meetings in Illinois Yearly Meeting. Her monthly meeting endorsed her ministry; and in 1986 at the annual session, she reported on her three-year journey. Lucy Talley was issuing a call for renewal to the
constituent meetings of Illinois Yearly Meeting to receive and empower their ministers.

Almost three and a half years ago, I had a leading to undertake a traveling ministry among Friends. I was traveling home from yearly meeting, elated at the experience of community that happened there, but saddened by Friends’ feelings of disappointment that this same feeling was lacking in the lives of the monthly meetings. I began wondering what it would take to deepen the lives of the monthly meetings so that the holy spirit might be empowered to move within the Society of Friends in a new way, bringing us closer to what the early members of the Religious Society called ‘living in the power of the apostles days.’...A true leading from the spirit comes to the whole community by means of one person.

The leading I have been given draws me into a relationship of accountability with the monthly meeting which is essential to an ongoing ministry.

...Earlier traveling Friends had great authority because their gifts were recognized and acknowledged by those who knew them, and could hold in check their excesses and pray for their failings. They depended upon their home meetings for prayer, support, practical advice and often the means to sustain themselves as they traveled, sometimes for years at a time, as well as ongoing care for the families of such released Friends. In our day we need to find ways of fostering that mutual accountability to one another within our monthly meetings. We need our gifts acknowledged and we need to be empowered by others to use them in service of God. (12)

I feel that Lucy’s traveling ministry led to the eventual creation of the position of a field secretary [Minute Book of ILYM. 1991.Minute 57]. The part time position was originally designed, not as traveling ministry, but as a resource role to serve the needs of monthly meetings. Over time, the role has been viewed differently by individual field secretaries. Some people viewed it was seen as a resource position aimed at encouraging the growth of meetings, and for others, it was a calling to minister. There has never been clear agreement within our yearly meeting.

Part 4: How I Became a Traveling Minister

Here is the story of how my religious vocation as a Quaker traveling minister began.

My calling into ministry began as a small seed when I was a child being raised in the Catholic Church. Although the church provided fertile ground for my development as a mystic, my vocation to serve God was thwarted since I was a woman and later a mother. Among the Friends I found an open door to serve in many ways. Quaker history is full of stories of women ministers who were seeking a mystical, immediate experience of Spirit,
as followers of Jesus. When I read of George Fox’s search for Truth, I found myself in deep affinity with him. Margaret Fell, the Mother of Israel, as she was called, also inspired me in her courageous nurturance of Quakers everywhere.

I am a mystic. I talk with God and hear messages in response. That made me an oddity in the meeting that I joined after moving to the Midwest. It was there where I first received my leading to minister among Friends. It was not easy for my message to be understood and received in a meeting with such strong intellectual tendencies.

Fortunately, there were several seasoned elders in residence who grasped my mystical way of communing with God. One beloved elder, Alice Walton, once told me that she had never had a mystical experience, but she trusted that I had.

Then I had a vision in 1984 that changed my life dramatically. I was meditating at home one evening when suddenly a vision overcame me. I found myself kneeling with the three Marys at the foot of the cross. Slowly I lifted my eyes expecting to see the broken, dying body of Jesus, the symbol of my Catholic childhood. Instead I witnessed a bright light, more luminous and encompassing than anything I had ever experienced. In that single moment my heart was transformed by the tender love of Jesus. I feel that I was given a momentary glimpse of the Divine in full glory. I knew that Jesus was indeed the Christ. All my doubts and distrust about Christians were wiped away. For the first time, in that moment of pure ecstasy, I became a Christian.

Not long after the vision occurred, in a time of meditation I heard a Voice speaking to me, saying with an insistent and clear message – “Record your ministry.” I did not understand what the message meant, and for a long time I ignored it. As far as I knew, under Quaker practice everyone had the ability and responsibility to minister. When the Voice would not relent, I turned to my meeting elder, Alice Walton, for clarification. She explained to me that the recording of ministry was an ancient practice that had been laid down by most Friends meetings. In earlier times it had been the way for Friends acknowledged and recognized special spiritual gifts, particularly those of public ministers. Recording offered a process for holding ministers accountable by providing elders to support and guide them in their work.

Notwithstanding the historical precedent for laying down the practice of recorded ministry, Alice took my leading (i.e. direct guidance from God) seriously and insisted on forming a clearness committee to consider it with other elders from the Meeting. After we met for prayerful consideration of my concern, the committee agreed that I should first present my leading to the Meeting. Even though I could have chosen to decline the committee’s direction, and even though I was scared, I committed to take the next step. I knew that our Meeting would struggle with my request, especially since my call to ministry had happened in a Christian context.

For a year, the entire community sought clearness regarding my leading. Some people supported me but I also endured intense questioning and even a few direct attacks. My request had apparently reopened the wounds of those who had rejected Jesus. Our Quaker
meeting had attracted people coming from various Christian churches who were wounded by their childhood faith communities. Hearing me witnessing for Jesus, while at the same time making a claim to a vocation in ministry, caused them to be deeply unhappy. For a while I was definitely persona non grata. I asked God repeatedly to release me from this painful duty. The message I received was very clear—“Accept this time of sacrifice and you will be rewarded later.”

Yet there were times of pure acceptance of the burden I was asked to carry, accompanied by a feeling of deep peace. A notation from my journal of that period reads, “The day of change is approaching. I whirl and turn in a joyful dance, uncertain of where my feet will land. Trusting all in God’s wisdom, rejecting human thought and advice. Peace surrounds me. Step out onto the water simply because you are bidden to do so.”

One experience particularly stands out in my memory. The business meeting had called a threshing session to give the entire community an opportunity to focus on my leading. As I scanned the room, I noted that a member who was a psychologist was present. My first thought was that he had been asked to check the sanity of a woman who hears voices. Mystics can be easily psychologized these days. This was a tense occasion for me. I wanted nothing more than to hide away and never see those people again.

At the threshing session I told the meeting of the Voice’s guidance to record my ministry. It was not too hard for me because I had already related it to many people in the room before. There was silence and then a stranger responded, a young Evangelical Quaker who chanced to be visiting us that day. I never forgot his words—“If we feel Maurine’s calling is genuine, we should write it on our hearts, affirm it with our lips, and rejoice with her.” I wept, being so moved by his words. To this day I believe he was an angel sent to comfort and encourage me.

Everyone who heard of my leading was challenged to take a position. I wondered if they were thinking: “Is she mentally ill? Is this person an authentic mystic or a charlatan?” Others, especially non-believers, saw me as an interesting relic or a source of difficulty for the meeting. There were very few fence sitters. As time went on, the division in the meeting became even more apparent. My duty was to remain steadfast and faithful in the midst of turmoil, keeping my head down and my hand to the plow, neither looking to the right or to the left. How could I remain objective to the direction in which my life was turning? It was not easy. My challenge, as a follower of Jesus, was to convey his message to people who were largely unaware of his presence. George Fox had said, “Christ has come to teach his people himself.” Only a few of us still believed that it was true. At times my isolation in the community was profound.

A few weeks had passed when the Clerk approached me to say that the business meeting could not reach unity regarding my request. I told her that I felt that the recording of my ministry had already taken place since I had done as St. Paul advised, *I will announce your name to my brothers. I will sing your praise in the midst of the assembly. I will put my trust in him* (Hebrews Chapter 2: 12-13). (13)
Originally, the recording of a ministry was simply an acknowledgment of the call into service by placing one’s ministry under the care and guidance of the meeting. To my mind I had been faithful in recording my ministry; the next step would be to find spiritual guides. That process took many years because we all needed to learn how to guide one another in a ministry. In our culture of individualism we had forgotten the role of obedience in spiritual development.

For the ensuing years, I continued to follow my calling while receiving deep spiritual support from several members of my meeting in the form of an unofficial guidance committee. When I participated in the Friends General Conference Traveling Ministries Program as an occasional resource and later as field secretary for our yearly meeting, a few elders in my yearly meeting and beyond who valued my ministry, were very encouraging and offered me clearness. I had no official endorsement from my monthly meeting; yet there was personal support and eldership from wise ones along the way.

Something which always helped me to remain grounded during my struggles with the leading was the tradition of traveling ministry as demonstrated by early Friends, such as John Woolman and Margaret Fell. Their ministry was conducted under the guidance of their meetings, which offered ongoing support, both spiritual and financial. Leadings were discerned by the entire community, and ministers were guided by seasoned elders. John Woolman mentions in his journal that he waited for the approval of his meeting before he traveled in ministry, sometimes for months. We have lost the practice of obedience and guidance nowadays in the American spirit of “do your own thing.” Our meetings need to regain an understanding of their role in guidance of leadings which arise in individuals within the meeting.

After being chosen as the Field Secretary in 2005, I received a leadership scholarship and became a residential scholar at Pendle Hill. After three months spent in contemplation, another leading emerged. I felt that God was showing me that keeping my leading hidden from my Quaker meeting [as a whole] was not living in Truth. Twenty-five years had elapsed since the elders of my meeting had brought forth my calling for consideration by the business meeting. When I returned home after my sojourn, I asked my hidden elders to help me discern my being released full time to serve as a traveling minister. At first they expressed fear of the predictable negative reactions of certain members. Then, somewhat in the traditional way of elders or earlier times, they carefully discerned my leading and formally composed a minute asking the meeting as a whole to endorse my ministry and provide some form of financial support.

After a yearlong deliberation by the Ministry and Counsel Committee, the only answer I received was an ambiguous silence. Although I knew that many members of the meeting loved me, there was a small core of people who rejected what I stood for. I finally understood that their silence toward me was their response to my request to be released. The Ministry and Counsel Committee instead developed a general process for acknowledging and supporting the gifts of members; not for recording a ministry. The document that was approved by the meeting, to my mind, precluded the kind of ministry that I was called into. They were not wrong; we were simply going in different directions.
Even though I felt alone in my own meeting, there were always wise guides or elders supporting my discernment. With guidance from elders in my yearly meeting and from elders beyond the yearly meeting, I continued my work as a traveling minister for Illinois Yearly Meeting and as a resource for Clear Creek Meeting. With assistance from these wise ones outside of my meeting, I recognized that I needed a Quaker community that could unify in supporting my ministry. I understood finally that a *called minister* must be supported by a *called community*. Painfully and slowly, with the help of the wise elders outside of my meeting, I began to seek another spiritual community to call home.

I felt it was time for redirection, so I took a risk and applied for membership to a small Quaker community in southern Illinois, the one where I had often visited as a traveling minister and where I once did foot washing. Their greatest strength was having a “don’t know mind,” as the Buddhists have put it. Over a six-month period of clearness meetings and after careful discernment, they accepted me into membership and agreed to support my ministry.

The following is the minute of acceptance:

*Southern Illinois Friends Meeting, minute of January 25, 2009:*

> The meeting records Maurine as a traveling minister. We look forward to working with Maurine to provide her with elder oversight and a traveling letter and to further discern our role of supporting her ministry. (14)

I was surprised to hear that the Meeting took the unexpected step of formally recording the ministry, which I had not requested of them. When the clerk called to tell me that I had been accepted into membership, he also revealed the meeting’s decision to record my ministry, saying

> “It seemed like the right thing to do.” That action marked the first recording of a ministry in Illinois Yearly Meeting since 1919. My leading “to record my ministry” was finally accomplished, after thirty years of discernment.

Upon reflection, one thing is certain -- the path I had been treading to record my ministry was not hard for people to see since it was challenging all of us along the way. I struggled to stay on it, finding each steppingstone being revealed just as I needed it.

When St. Paul said, “We walk by faith and not by sight,” (15) he was speaking of the Christian journey. I understand it in a deeply personal way. There have been times when I have fallen to my knees begging for help. My prayers are answered in surprising ways.

Just as I think my path has ended, a detour appears out of nowhere. Over the years I have developed my “steppingstone theology.” Later I discovered a quote from John Woolman that spoke to my condition:

> I have sometimes felt a necessity to stand up, but that spirit, which is of the world hath so much prevailed in many, and the pure life of truth (hath) so
been pressed down, that I have gone forward, not as one traveling in a road cast up and prepared, but as a (person) walking through a miry place, in which there are stones here and there to step on, but so situated that one step being taken, time is necessary to see where to step next. (16)

Looking back over my journey, I can see how God was teaching us through the struggle. Over time, I have learned that God is calling us to be radical, to dig down to the roots.

My spiritual pathway has involved both struggle and joy, and that is how God teaches. Along the way I relinquished my personal security and learned how to feel more comfortable in an uncomfortable place. Whenever people asked what my ministry would be, I always answered that God was showing me step by step. I still walk this path, less lonely, less afraid. For many Friends my calling has been proven as coming genuinely from God. Doubts may still linger, yet my ministry has been recorded on the hearts of many.

Footnotes:


2 Great Britain Faith and Practice: 19.08 Francis Howgill, one of the Westmoreland Seekers [1618-1669]

"The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land"

3 "a great people to be gathered" occurs in the Journal, on page 1:140 of the 8-volume Works:

4 Book of John 13: 34, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

5 Original Peace Testimony: The Declaration of 1660 is reprinted in Nickalls, 398-403. Its full title is given on p. 398 as "A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God, called Quakers, against all plotters and fighters in the world, for the removing of the ground of jealousy and suspicion from both magistrates and people in the kingdom, concerning wars and fightings."

6 The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20)

7 John 21:6 “And He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find a catch.’ So they cast and then they were no able to haul it in
because of the great number of fish."

8 Excerpted from Rufus Jones: Essential Writings (FGC Books) 9 ibid

10 Personal correspondence from Stephanie Crumley-Effinger

11 Jonathan Wright Plummer: Quaker Philanthropy by Elizabeth Warren (self-published work available on Amazon.com)

12 Personal correspondence from Lucy Tally Davenport

13 Hebrews 2: 12-31 "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises."

14 Minutes of Business Meeting [2009-01-25], Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting, Carbondale IL

15 2 Corinthians 5-7 “We walk by faith and not by sight”


About the Author:

Maurine Pyle is a member of Illinois Yearly Meeting; and a member of Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting in Carbondale, Illinois, where she has resided since 2009.

She has traveled in ministry among both Programmed and Unprogrammed Friends in their meetings and churches; as well as at retreats of the New Foundation Fellowship. She has also visited with meetings of Friends in Great Britain.

In 1998 Maurine was invited to share her spiritual journey as the Plummer Lecturer at the annual gathering of Illinois Yearly meeting, titled “Follow Me.” From 2003-2005, she served as the Clerk of Illinois Yearly Meeting and from 2005-2008 as the Field Secretary of Illinois Yearly Meeting. In 2006, she was offered a residential scholarship as a Quaker Leadership Scholar at Pendle Hill.

In 2014, she published New Children of the Light: Quaker Youth Speak Their Truth to the World, a compilation of interviews with millennial Friends. Internationally, Maurine has served as a peace educator in Russia, Guatemala and India.