



A Modest Proposal



by
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FOR THE REVITALIZATION OF THE QUAKER
MESSAGE IN THE UNITED STATES

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Author's Note

A Modest Proposal is based on a series of blogs I did in late 2010. The material in this PDF differs from the blog posts in that I have expanded the chapters to include thoughts introduced by others and my responses to them. I especially want to acknowledge, for their insightful comments and input, C. Wess Daniels, Chuck Fager, Robin Mohr, Katie Terrell, and Jeff Wolfe. Steven Dotson is the one who originally challenged me to put my thoughts in writing (following the Conference for Emerging Leaders held in September 2010). My thanks also goes to Jane Hinshaw Mastin, who took a rough Word document and turned it into this fine PDF for distribution.

Also, please note that all of the websites and pictures of videos are “hot links” (so long as you are reading this on-line) to the actual sites, so that you can view them in their original context.

— Brent



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The Impending Death of Congregational Life in the United States: Not Quite

Religious life in America is in decline. That's a statement I've heard repeatedly. And yet research seems to tell another tale. According to the Association of Religion Data Archives, in the past 20 years

- there are 32,000+ new congregations dotting the U.S. landscape
- there are almost 29 million new worship attendees
- identified affiliation with a recognized religious body or faith group is up 26+%

These statistics do not, so far as I can tell, take into account the emergent church plants, house churches, or the new monastic communities.

Then there are the Quakers. In the past 20 years:

- we've added 311 new congregations
- have lost 17,000 members
- and dropped recognized affiliation by 14%
- Friends United Meeting has dropped 15,000 members
- Evangelical Friends International has dropped 3,000 members
- Friends General Conference has grown 1,000 members

I realize that many people have the opposite impression regarding church involvement. As I noted at the beginning, the popular view is that religious life in America is in decline. As long time member of the Religious Research Association and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and a person who reads the reports of groups like the Association of Religious Data Archives, Maryknoll, U.S. Congregations and the like, I trust the figures that I have used. I think I am working from a position where what I have stated is more than my impression. I will be so bold as to say I find the research methods and reporting of the groups I've cited much more rigorous than some other popular "research" sites.

Yes, I am aware that there is "dishonest" reporting. But if anything, the figures I've used are probably under-reported since primarily African-American and Hispanic congregations fly under the "research radar" and so are not fully accounted for. As I also said, the research, from what I have seen, has not caught up with the new monastic movement and house churches.

The nuances of a particular denomination's (or movement's — i.e. independents) growth or decline are available on the sites I've cited.

Hmmm. All of this decline among Friends at a time when there is renewed interest in Quaker life and spirituality. This interest is shown by the number of Quaker titles on amazon.com and their strong sales and through other things, such as Beliefnet.com's "Belief-O-Matic." Thirty thousand people a day try Belief-O-Matic. An issue of *Newsweek* magazine reported that a "disproportionate number" of respondents to

the quiz identified themselves as ‘liberal Quakers.’” The article notes that the page on the BeliefNet web site devoted to Quakers has become one of Beliefnet’s top fifty links!

So why aren’t our Meetinghouses bursting with newcomers?

One reason, in my opinion, is that many Quaker congregations (especially pastoral ones) have bought into what U.S. Congregations (Friends congregations were a part of this amazing study) researchers call “Ten Myths” —

1. “Nothing ever changes here” is an accurate statement about congregational life
2. Congregations grow by attracting new people who are not attending religious services anywhere
3. Worshipers who regularly attend are almost always members of the congregation
4. Because worshipers are highly involved in their congregations, they spend little time being involved in their community
5. A typical worshiper is over 65 years of age and retired
6. Worship is boring.
7. Most worshipers attend services in small congregations
8. Congregations have difficulty adapting to the changing world around them because the majority of worshipers are not open to change
9. People under 30 do not participate in religious activities
10. All of today’s worshipers prefer traditional hymns

(you can find out more about these myths by going to the U.S. Congregations website at <http://www.uscongregations.org> or reading their *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who’s Going Where and Why.*)

Living these myths leads to a reality of lack instead of abundance and scrambling to “fix” what’s wrong and to find “best practices” to remedy the deficiencies identified by the myths. Our congregations fail to see the obvious lacks (the need for hospitality, vital worship, appealing buildings, signage, community outreach) and accept the myths and then wonder why nobody “likes us.”

The first part of my modest proposal is that our congregations need to look at what flourishing congregations nationally are doing well and see where their strengths converge with the findings from the research studies. The research (U.S. Congregations, <http://www.uscongregations.org>; National Congregations Study, <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/>; Faith Communities Today, <http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/>; and more) tell us that congregations that are growing (and not just numerically — numerically is just one way to measure growth) have certain characteristics. A flourishing congregation:

- Provides a sense of community
- Seeks to educate attendees about faith
- Shares faith with others

- Serves others (outside the congregation)
- Conveys the sense that life has meaning

These all may seem obvious. But we Friends often do not do any sort of self-examination that looks at what we're doing well. One of the things to notice about these signs of vitality is that they have very little to do with specific "programs." They are about attitudes and how faith is lived out. They move a congregation from saying or doing such things as "If we just had someone to minister to youth and bring them in" or "Let's make worship more contemporary" to asking which of these strengths do we already have and how can we build on them? Perhaps if the strength were turned into queries, we could look at them more intentionally: So here goes:

- How can we provide a deeper sense of community?
- How can we educate attendees (no matter their age) about Quaker faith and life?
- How can we share Friends' faith with those who do not currently attend but are looking for what we have to offer?
- How can we serve others (i.e., our community) in addition to ourselves and Friends institutions?
- How do we show that life and faith have intertwined meaning?

I would also propose that our Meetings stop and take time to answer the following query:

What is God calling us to do with these people in this place at this time?

- These People!
- This place!
- This time!

It is important to note that what I've said so far about growth is NOT predicated on some hope to save institutions or jobs. I think that will be clear when I get to the meatier proposals that I will make. Those come later. These opening chapters lay the framework for the "modest proposal" that is to come. This framework contains further information from the research I've been privy to over the past ten years.

After this framework come the more substantial modest proposals — proposals that deal with worship style, leadership, architecture, outreach, institutions, and more.

They are applicable whether one thinks that the state of American religious life is growing or declining.

Signs of Vitality

While it may seem that I am being a bit research heavy in these early sections, the research leads to a point. That point is to make decisions and/or proposals from a basis more solid than hunches or impressions. It is statistically significant to see what 350,000 congregational members (including Friends) have to say about their congregations' strengths and weaknesses (U.S. Congregations <http://www.uscongregations.org>). And that's just one example.

The research shows that vital congregations across denominational/faith lines share certain characteristics.

- Vital congregations help people grow spiritually. They focus on the long-term development of the ministry of the entire congregation (spiritual development and providing ministry opportunities).
- Vital congregations encourage participation. They move people into meaningful ministry roles. They ask attendees what they feel passionate about and what they see as their ministry. They identify what types of new people the congregation attracts (e.g., returnees, switchers). They ask new people what made the congregation attractive to them. They create small group experiences, such as prayer or study groups.
- Vital congregations offer meaningful worship experiences. They evaluate current worship service for vitality and involvement (by all age groups).
- Vital congregations welcome new people. They increase the visibility of the congregation in the community (e.g., Web site, Twitter, paid newspaper and telephone book ads, good outdoor signage, participation in community events). They encourage members to invite others and give them the tools to invite effectively (e.g. Bring a Friend Sundays, special events). They identify and make personal and telephone follow-up contact with all visitors, especially first time worship visitors. They offer a group for new attendees.
- Vital congregations commit to a positive future. They identify congregational strengths and ask how the congregation can optimize and leverage these strengths. They evaluate the congregation's current organization and committee structure and then minimize the number of maintenance committees. They create ministry teams (worship, education, outreach) instead of standing committees.

The second part of my modest proposal is for our congregations to look at these characteristics and actions and ask "Which of these is an accurate representation of our congregation?" "Are we doing things that commit to a positive future, provide meaningful worship for all ages, welcome new people, etc?"

Or do we behave more like the people in this video parable?



So again some congregational queries:

- Who are we?
- Why do we exist — what's our mission?
- What is God calling us to be and do?
- Do we welcome others?
- How do we relate to our community?
- How do we adapt to change?

These are queries an entire congregation should work on — not just a committee or some named congregational leaders (i.e., a pastor. And please note, I think this is the first time I've used the word/role "pastor" up until now while writing on this topic). There are a variety of ways that this can be done. I recommend "World Cafe" (<http://www.theworldcafe.com/>) — it is very participatory and so fits well with Friends' process.

As one of the readers of the blog post where this chapter originally appeared noted, what I said above involves "we." Personal autonomy seems to rule today in life and at church — and in the Society of Friends. The reader asked, "Will I let go of my point of view if the congregation is in a different place?"

Perhaps then, one of the key roles of a congregational leader is to foster places/opportunities to explore "we-ness" — and to participate in it. We need to find ways to foster communal thinking and life. Perhaps Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* could be used as a study guide.

After all, if there is no "we," then why do we need a congregation? Hmmm...

Getting (Not Putting) The Light Out

This is the last of the research oriented pieces of my “modest proposal.” Next I will move into my proposed action steps related directly to the Revitalization of the Quaker Message in the United States. But first, a bit more from the various congregational studies — both to inform and dispel a few other myths.

Another one of the things I hear posited as “conventional wisdom” is that only Evangelical and theologically conservative churches are growing. So what role does theology play in numerical growth?

- There is very little relationship between growth and theological orientation
- Highest growth is predominantly conservative congregations (38%) and liberal congregations (39%)
- Among Evangelical denominations it is the less conservative churches that are most likely to grow (30%)
- Growth is lowest among congregations in the middle (27%)

That’s not to say theology is irrelevant. Of course it’s not. But a congregation’s theology does not seem to be the prime indicator of whether it will grow or not. So if theology (conservative vs liberal vs whatever) isn’t the factor, what is? The answer is — a clear sense of mission.

- More important than theological orientation is the religious character of the congregation and clarity of mission and purpose
- Growing congregations are clear about why they exist
- They grow because they understand their reason for being and they make sure they do the things that are essential to their life as a religious organization

That last point leads to an obvious further question — what is essential? The research says:

- Essential to the mission is to create a community where people encounter God
- Congregations that involved children in worship were more likely to experience significant growth. Congregations that did not were much more likely to experience decline

There is a strong relationship between growth and the sense that the congregation is spiritually vital and alive. And that it is welcoming and hospitable.

- Congregations that grow do more than say they are welcoming and hospitable. They live hospitality and welcoming out in very intentional ways.
- They engage in a variety of recruitment-related activities (special events, community gatherings, bring a friend Sundays, etc)
- Attendees tell others about their congregation
- They make themselves more visible through various forms of advertising

There is one programmatic activity that is most strongly related to growth — establishing or maintaining a web site for the congregation. Congregations that have started or maintained a web site in the past year are most likely to grow.

This last piece, and moving beyond it into using social networking, is crucial. Social networking is not a fad or only for the young. Indeed, the fastest growing segment on Facebook is 55-65 year old females.

So the third part of this modest proposal is to learn to be more mission-centric and people oriented. Why are we here and how do we let know others that we'd be happy to have them join with us? In a word, we need to think like a missional church.

Below is a list of some of the resources I've used in helping me prepare these opening chapters. It includes some sites about the missional church movement.

Resources

- The ARDA — <http://www.thearda.com/>
- U.S. Congregations — <http://www.uscongregations.org>
- Insights into Religion — <http://religioninsights.org/>
- Synagogue3000 — <http://www.synagogue3000.org/>
Especially check out the material on “Next Dor”
- Shapevine — <http://shapevine.com/>
- Leadership Network — <http://leadnet.org/>
- Roxburgh — <http://roxburghmissionalnet.com/>



Unprogrammed Programmed or Programmed Unprogrammed?

“Have you anything to declare?” is a vital challenge to which every one of us is personally called to respond and is also a challenge that every meeting should consider of primary importance. It should lead us to define, with such clarity as we can reach, precisely what it is the Friends of this generation have to say that is not, as we believe, being said effectively by others. What, indeed, have we to declare to this generation that is of sufficient importance to justify our separate existence as part of the Christian fellowship?”
— Edgar Dunstan

“What, indeed, have we to declare...?”

I believe that what we have to declare begins with worship. Indeed, as Britain Yearly Meeting’s Faith and Practice says, “Worship is at the heart of Quaker experience. For God is met in the gathered meeting and through the Spirit leads us into ways of life and understandings of truth ...” — Quaker faith & practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain

Okay, so far you may be thinking, all Christian groups say that worship is central. So what’s different enough to justify our separate existence (in Dunstan’s words)?

Hmmm. Perhaps it’s not what is different enough just now — but what should be.

I think Quakerism has one of the most winsome invitations ever to offer to people. The heart of Quaker worship is gathering to meet God. The distinctive of the Quaker message of worship is that we are not inviting you to come hear a specialist speak about God, another person read a book about God, others sing some songs about God, but rather to come and experience God. We come to meet God. To encounter the Divine. Not just to be told about the Divine through story, sermon, song, and silence, but to actually gaze into the face of our loving God and listen for God’s words to our souls. Could there be a better invitation than that?

That’s what worship should be — about participatory listening to/for God. That would be distinctive from the Catholic tradition or the Methodists or the mega-church. I am not saying anything is wrong with the Catholics, Methodists, mega-churches, et al. All I am saying is that we Friends are not called to be or act exactly like them. We have a distinct form of worship to offer and a unique call from God to fulfill.

I fear (and confess to having participated in) though, that we are maintaining a Quaker worship pattern among programmed traditions (I will speak about unprogrammed later) that leads to a worship service (I use the phrase worship service intentionally) that is a pale imitation of other Protestant traditions. The service is outlined in a bulletin and is centered, like a Protestant service, primarily on the sermon — the proclamation of the Word.

Now this is fine, I suppose, but is it enough, in Dunstan’s words to “...justify our separate existence...”? Drop the name Friends from the front of the building and maybe it is.

But I don’t think so. I think all this bulletin making and worship planning takes us away from the central call of Friends to invite others to come and hear that Voice that will say to them “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition...” When they hear that, their hearts and souls will leap for joy.

So part four of my modest proposal is to scrap the bulletin and the worship planning. Ditch them completely. And trust the Spirit to lead worship. If George Fox was right (and all the various branches of the Quaker tree claim him) then Christ is our present teacher. Let's let Him teach. "Let us let go and let God" as my Evangelical Friends pastor J. Earl Geil often said in many of the sermons I heard as a teen (about the only thing I remember specifically, him saying).

Let Jesus lead worship.

Dare we?

Now, for the programmed folk who (like me) enjoy singing, hearing a choir, a sermon, etc, notice that I have not said to scrap those things. I am saying to scrap the programming part. Instead of fitting holy silence in, use it as the basis for worship. Then trust God to lead the choir to stand and share musically. And move the pastor to give a prepared sermon. And for someone (even a kid!) to suggest singing a hymn. And for a time of prayer for those in need. And times of vocal ministry from the various folks whom God has gathered that particular day.

Have hymn or song books in the pews/benches — along with Bibles. And, instead of a bulletin with an outlined program, have one that contains a brief description of what Quaker worship is and how it will be planned by God, which may make it look unplanned to us. Until the Spirit brings it together.

That would be the kind of Meeting for Worship that would justify our separate existence! It would be experiential, spiritually experimental, and Spirit-led.

That would mean we would serve as a place where we invite people to encounter God and other like-hearted people. People searching for the sacred. Some having found more than others, some of us just learning the way or beginning to think about the Divine seriously.

I say like-hearted and not like-minded. We don't all have to think alike. Sometimes I'm of two minds about things all on my own!

Programmed and semi-programmed Friends need to quit planning a worship service and eliminate the play-by-play bulletin. Instead we need to learn to trust God to lead the worship.

To unprogrammed Friends, I say, "Don't gloat." Yes, you may not have to discard some of the obvious trappings that we programmed folks do, but there are some that, while perhaps more subtle, are just as inhibiting.

One thing that can be inhibiting is the idea that the silence is sacrosanct to the point where we worship silence not worship in the silence. Unprogrammed Friends need to create a sense of hospitality in the silence and a feeling that "anything, God willing, can happen." Including — gasp — congregational singing in worship. Yes, that's theoretically possible, but how often does it happen? And are there items there to encourage it — songbooks on the benches instead of a table in the corner? Bibles on the benches? Encouragement from the clerk that all — young and old — are invited to speak the words God brings to them.

I am not at all as certain that waiting worship as practiced among some Friends is any more conducive or inhibiting that programmed worship is. I think it can be just as deadly. Especially if we take silence to be the norm instead of the medium through which we experience God. Singing and other worshipful activities can lead us into the presence — in the same way that the procession, et al in the Catholic church do ... preparing us for a deep experience of the Real Presence.

Indeed, I maintain, based on my experience of unprogrammed worship (which is not a slim as some folks might think for a fellow who grew up a “pastorized” Friend) is that it can be, in its worst form, as rigidly programmed as a programmed meeting. The order of service is just implied and/or understood by the insiders. And any outsiders or visitors keep to their benches because they are afraid of making any kind of Friendly faux pas — like kneeling or standing at the wrong time in a Catholic mass.

I think that moving to an unprogrammed programmed (sounds like an oxymoron doesn’t it?) would be a real challenge for many meetings/churches. Hence the satirical title — a “modest” proposal. It would call many congregations to a completely new way of thinking about worship — why we do and how we do it. This is a discussion that would be valuable just for having it.

Something this substantial cannot be driven by one person or small group either. It has to be arrived at by a sense of the meeting. If presented as a way to be faithful to the call that God has given us to be Friends and attract others who long to hear the voice of the Spirit, then it has potential for excitement and renewal. Again, not necessarily of institutional Quakerism, but of the sharing of our message.

For some of the folks, who are fearful of change but also fearful of decline (and see the eventual closing the doors), I suppose it could be positioned as “what have we got to lose?” Which is an ironic question to me — what have we got to lose by being obedient to the Spirit? Everything and nothing, I think is the answer to that.

There are ways to involve kids in worship, too — to help them sense the Spirit moving. It may be as simple as asking them, as a family prepares for Meeting, if they have a song they’d like to sing in worship, or a Bible story they like, or something special that happened to them. And then encourage them to “listen” with their hearts for the right time to share that. Tell them that God will let them know “when.” A practical listening for God.

My proposal in changing worship especially is not geared toward making it more interesting for those attending. It’s to make those attending more prepared and/or ready to encounter the Divine. It’s to make it more participatory — so that we see that we are each responsible for Meeting for Worship. That when we all come prepared to participate, we are all blessed in amazing and maybe even unexpected ways.

Friend Thomas Green said, “Worship is essentially an act of adoration, adoration of the one true God in whom we live and move and have our being. Forgetting our little selves, our petty ambitions, our puny triumphs, our foolish cares and fretful anxieties, we reach out towards the beauty and majesty of God. The religious life is not a dull, grim drive towards moral virtues, but a response to a vision of greatness.”

Our worship must facilitate this response to a vision of greatness and invite people into experiencing the presence of God. So, humbly (and I mean that sincerely) let’s let go and let God lead worship.

Bye-bye bulletin.

So long planned worship service.

Hello fresh movements of the Spirit.

Where to Sit: A Shift in Architecture

From our beginnings, we Friends have held that one place is no more sacred than any other — all places are fit for the worship of God. Early on we established a sort of generic Meetinghouse look — free from the ornamentation and classic cross arrangement of most Christian churches.

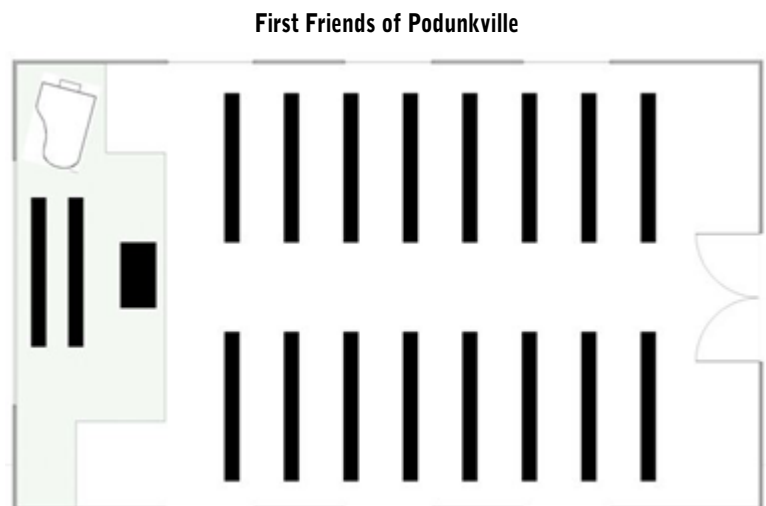
This architecture stayed consistent among Friends (regardless of persuasion) until the rise of the pastoral movement. Then the buildings of Friends churches (primarily) began to resemble other church buildings of the time they were constructed. For example, I've been in Friends churches constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century and they look a lot like the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, et al churches built in that era -- often following the Akron plan (the name came from the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Akron, Ohio) which was based on increasing Sunday school attendance. Some even have a modified bell tower -- sans the bell, of course!

This trend continued. The congregation I grew up in (Highland Avenue Friends) moved from a building that was a modified Akron plan building into a modern, straight lined building with Sunday school wings growing off each side of the sanctuary. Yes, we used the the word sanctuary. About the only thing that differentiated the Westgate Friends Church building from the Lutheran, Wesleyan, Nazarene, Evangelical United Brethren and other church buildings of the 50s and 60s was the lack of a cross hanging on the back wall behind the pulpit.

Even old Friends buildings were modified to fit the pastoral system. Benches were removed and pews brought in. Organs and pianos and pulpits were installed on a raised platform at one end. So now many, if not most, Friends church buildings (speaking primarily of programmed meetings) look something like this —

Which is fine, I think, for most preaching-centric or rite-centric faith groups. If the proclamation of the Word is the primary purpose of a faith group, then naturally the congregation should face the place where that Word is going to be preached. Also, if the acts of taking communion or baptism are central expressions of the faith, then it makes sense to be looking at the altar where the Host is consecrated or the font or pool where baptisms take place.

But it really doesn't fit what Quaker worship should be about — welcoming the presence of Christ in our midst. The very nature of this seating arrangement puts the focus on people and performance — not on God. We, who worship in such a setting, then look through our fellow worshippers (or the back of their heads) to a preacher, a worship leader, a choir



to take us through the parts of worship in the same we sit in an auditorium to watch a play. We, except for congregational singing, mostly observe. We sit and watch others.

So part five of my modest proposal is that we scrap that seating arrangement in favor of something like this —

There are three reasons for this alteration. One is so that our view changes from looking at a particular place from which we expect ministry to a view that allows ministry to come from anywhere in the room — which would also imply “from anyone” in the room. It moves us from an expectation that others will do worship while we watch to watching for where the Spirit is moving (both externally — in the room — and internally — in our souls).

The second reason is that it acoustically makes sense for Quakers. Sitting in pews that face one direction does not make it easy to hear the vocal ministry that arises from the people seated in those pews. Yes, some congregations have ushers who rush a microphone to a person who stands to minister, but that seems to me to be almost an act of sabotage to the holiness of that moment. It breaks holy stillness to have someone hurrying to bring a microphone to a speaker. When we sit facing each other then we can hear each other. We are not scattered all around the room looking away from each other.

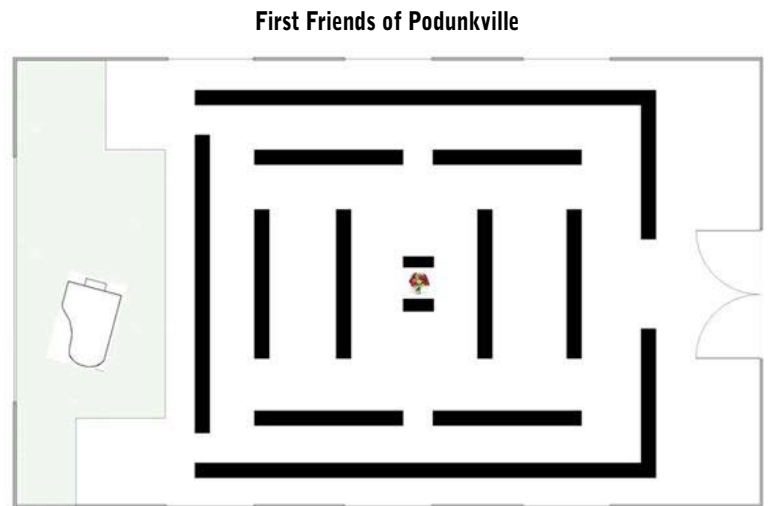
The third reason is that we actually will behold our fellow worshippers and not just gaze at the backs of their heads. We will see the faces of those God has gathered that day. We will see the joy, the sorrow, the expectation, and all the other emotions that are writ large on our visages. As we see the gathered community, we can be moved to pray for them, care for them, love them.

As with ditching bulletins and programming, this part of my modest proposal is fraught with difficulty, I suppose. We have huge investments, emotionally and financially, in our buildings. Our parents were married there or our grandfather was on the trustees who bought the pews or it would just be too expensive to move everything.

Maybe.

But maybe, if we want to revitalize the Quaker message for this time, it is worth the investment emotionally and financially. For some congregations it may mean, like the video above, rearranging the pews in the sanctuary and making it a Meetingroom. (I would advise speaking with an architect about that and not just unscrewing the benches and moving them around — but that’s my congregational consultant side kicking in).

For other congregations it could mean moving out of the Meetingroom to some other location in the building. Leave the Meetingroom configured as it is for things such as weddings or public events and use another space for worship. It would be no difficult task to put chairs in a circle or square. Indeed, setting up just a few more chairs that the number of folks who usually comes to worship can help us feel as if we



are “full” rather than worshipping in a big mostly empty space. And have chairs ready to add if the Spirit moves new people to join.

Part five of my modest proposal obviously applies primarily to programmed Friends. I think unprogrammed Friends have their own architecture issues — among which could be replacing the benches that have been there since 1766 to something a wee bit more comfortable and putting a fresh coat of paint on the walls. But unprogrammed Quakers have largely kept to the original Quaker architectural ethos.

Let’s rearrange our worship space so that we look to God and look at each other.

Two resources I recommend are:

Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption, 1720-1920 by Emma Jones Lapsansky and Anne A. Verplanck

Holy Places: Matching Sacred Space with Mission and Message by Nancy DeMott, Tim Shapiro, and J. Brent Bill

The End of the Quaker Pastorate

“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the Quaker pastors.” — Brently VI, part II, Act 4, scene 2 (with apologies to William Shakespeare — and all the Quaker pastors.)

Okay, now that I have your attention, I do not mean that literally. Any more than Shakespeare did when he had Dick the Butcher utter that now famous line from *Henry VI* — “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” As one scholarly analysis of those words says, “... the famous remark by the plotter of treachery in Shakespeare’s King Henry VI shows [that] the surest way to chaos and tyranny even then was to remove the guardians of independent thinking.”

So, with tongue firmly in cheek, I propose we kill off the Quaker pastorate. Well, with tongue out of cheek, at least the way it is currently constituted.

Since our earliest days, Friends have railed against the hireling ministry. As George Fox himself said, “Christ saith to his ministers, ‘freely you have received, freely give,’ and they laboured ‘to keep the gospel without charge.’”

And yet, in the late 19th century many Quaker adopted what Fox would have seen as a hireling ministry — the pastoral system.

Now I am not going to rant against the pastoral system *per se*. I find it a bit gauche to bite the hand that fed me, so to speak. Nor do I think that the Quaker paid ministry is necessarily a bad thing — as an idea.

The way that it is practiced today, by and large, though, I think is not helpful to a revitalization of the Quaker message in the United States.

This issue is something I’ve wrestled with for a long time (since before I was recorded in 1980) — how does my role differ from the Presbyterian pastor next door — and how, or can, the idea of Quaker pastor be reconciled with the Friendly testimony against hireling ministers?

This is a pretty involved topic, though I do think it’s high time, especially given the number of seminaries preparing women and men for Friends pastoral work, that someone write a relevant guidebook or apology (or both) for the nature and work of the Quaker paid ministry.

Elton Trueblood asserts that men in the clerical profession in the times of the early Friends were considered “hirelings” because “they seemed to make the ministry more of a job than a calling.” Despite this rightful distaste for such an understanding of ministry, the whole idea of calling and following a leading is central to the nature of Friends ministerial work. It has to be a call, not just to general service, but to particular places of service at particular times. I see this differing from many other, especially mainline traditions, where women and men prepare for the ministry in general and that it becomes their career path.

I saw this most clearly in the semester I studied at a Lutheran seminary and heard various folks talk about their path into ministry. They often described it as a career choice — a holy career choice, but a choice, nonetheless. I was one of very few who used the concept of call as I delineated it above.

A concern about Quaker pastoral ministry has always been that it will evolve into “profession.” Richard John Neuhaus (certainly no left-leaning type), in *Freedom for Ministry: A Critical Affirmation of the Church and Its Mission*, points to the increasing consideration of the pastoral ministry as a “profession”.

This sounds to me a lot like what goes on at times among Friends in pastoral ministry. This move toward profession, Neuhaus says, “is a poignant confession of vocational bankruptcy.” Sounds like he and Fox and some other early Friends might agree.

Another difference (besides calling) is, I think, the question of authority. Many pastors in many denominations have authority by virtue of their ordination. A Catholic priest and Presbyterian pastor are both, in effect, the CEO’s of their congregation. That is not true for the Quaker paid minister (no matter how some might wish it was).

The Clerk is the authority in our Meetings. That’s a significant difference that we need to ensure is not blurred.

I do think there are a number of Biblical models for a Quaker paid ministry.

One is Ephesians 4:11&12 “It was he [Jesus] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...”

My understanding of what the Friendly model should be is reflective of the passage in Ephesians. Throughout the history of Friends, we have had folks in these various services. *Evangelists* — the Valiant Sixty, John Camm and John Audland to Bristol. *Pastors* — “Second Day Morning Meeting” which supervised the “nourishing of various flocks” (Elton Trueblood) and supporting various ministerial/pastoral types (not with salaries, but in support of their families).

Robert Barclay says, “We do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to the work of the ministry”

The paradox for Quaker paid ministry today is to find a third way where the paid minister is not the CEO of the local Meeting nor slave. The role of the Quaker paid minister must be to prepare God’s people for works of service. I see the Quaker paid minister as a fellow spiritual pilgrim — moving toward God with the rest of the congregation, set apart only because he or she was called to serve the members (even -- or maybe even especially — the annoying ones).

If authority or weight is granted, it comes not from the title, but because the congregation recognizes the spiritual depth of the paid minister in the same way it recognizes other weighty Friends. For Friends today, I believe that involves both the specialized ministry of a trained and called pastor and the universal ministry of a called and equipped congregation.

To facilitate that, Lorton Huesel said four things were essential

- The meeting for worship must be free from rigidity which prevents the workings of the Spirit
- Preaching in our meetings for worship must be under the leadership of the Spirit.
- We must adhere to Friends’ business methods and never let power and authority be centralized in the pastor.
- Paid ministers and the other members of the meeting must be trained in the art of silence.

Seth Hinshaw, in *The Spoken Ministry Among Friends*, said, “The pastor’s role in a Friend’s meeting is exacting and difficult. The pastor is not hired to preach, but liberated to serve.” The italics are mine. We need to recover, I think, that sense that the Quaker paid ministry is an exacting and difficult liberation to serve.

Notice that I have quit using the phrase Quaker pastor and moved to Quaker paid minister. I did that because I am concerned about the use of the title “pastor” and its implications. One of which is that the Quaker “pastor” functions exactly the same as a pastor in any other faith group.

When I served as pastor of Friends Memorial Church in Muncie, I had a sign on my door that said, “His Eminence’s Study.” Everyone knew it was a joke, because we Quaker pastoral types don’t use titles.

Or do we?

I’ve noticed, to my dismay, a creeping “title-ism,” lately. Like in a few of the Meeting newsletters I read from when the pastor signs her name “Pastor Betty Joy” or some such thing. I even read a piece by a Quaker pastor type who signed it “The Reverend Doctor.” This bothers me, even if these are folks whose ministry and friendship I respect and cherish.

It bothers me because I worry that by doing so we blur one of the distinguishing differences between being a Friends pastor and one in any other denomination.

Scott Russell Sanders, an unprogrammed Friend from Bloomington, Indiana and professor at Indiana University, writes in *Falling Toward Grace: Images of Religion and Culture in the Heartland*, how in the 19 century many Friends congregations began hiring ministers. The result, he says, is that they began behaving “for all the world like other low-temperature Protestant churches.”

That may sound harsh, but Elton Trueblood, in the 1960 Quaker Lecture at Indiana Yearly Meeting (and later in *Quaker Religious Thought*) said something similar when he noted that “our pastoral system in ... some areas...of Friends is merely a poor reflection of ... stronger Christian bodies.”

“The mistake,” Elton says, “was that a fundamentally alien system was taken over, almost intact, from other Christian bodies.”

One of the ways he said he knew that to be true was the preponderance of Friends pastors who allowed themselves to be referred to as “Rev. So and So” at community and other gatherings.

Scott and Elton, though poles apart on other issues, are in agreement on this one. And I’m with them. The role of the paid minister among Friends is like that in no other denomination. To be sure, there are similarities. But we need to keep the distinctives in mind, too.

We need to remember that we are neither CEO nor doormat. We are called to be co-laborers with Christ and congregation. That understanding of the unique relationship between the one called to minister and the other Friends who are members of the Meeting begins to erode the moment I begin referring to myself as Pastor Brent or Rev. Bill.

I read this piece the other day and wondered: *Does this describe us?*

At the core of this dilemma is the role of the Pastor as a spiritual leader. The late Erich Fromm noted that most people fear freedom, and seek to escape it by turning to a leader who can relieve them of any responsibility for their identity, character, and future. Many people treat their pastors as such shields against accountability. But that is not the Quaker way. Ultimately, a pastor who agrees to serve in that capacity is an accomplice in stunting someone's spiritual maturation, depriving them (and God) of the distinct rewards of an adult faith.

Rather than imposing a dictatorial control on the seeker or believer, the pastor is, above all, a teacher. ... Teaching happens only in an environment of freedom and curiosity, of commitment freely entered and community voluntarily joined. ... Robots are not told to "choose life that you may live," nor are computers informed of the consequences of their choices. But the people called Quakers are, because God cherishes our voluntary service and our obedience freely offered.

In that journey, no Quaker is under the compulsion of another. We have not given up an Egyptian Pharaoh to take on a pastoral one. Instead, God has liberated us from the very model of despotism, of ever abdicating our souls to another human being.

Pastors traditionally do not seek to deaden the mind or to stifle the heart. We provide authoritative information about what the Bible teaches and what the Lord requires of us. We embody (or seek to) the best of what Quaker living and Quaker values can attain. As teachers and as role models, pastors are essential to Quaker survival. But when acting as vicarious Quakers (living a Quaker life and thinking Quaker thoughts so the rest of us don't have to) or as externalized authorities (making all the tough choices), some pastors and their followers subvert the very tradition they claim to love.

Instead, as partners, by meeting our congregants and students in the sea of the Bible, we navigate together those ancient words and powerful insights. Pastors ... offer the shimmering wares of faith. But the Quaker, each Quaker, must decide for him or herself: do I buy it? Do I cherish it? Do I care for it so I can transmit it to my children?

Actually that's a piece by Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson about the role of the Rabbi (<http://judaism.ajula.edu/Content/ContentUnit.asp?CID=1542&u=5147&t=0>). I just cut out Rabbi and inserted Pastor (and Torah for Bible, Jew for Quaker, etc).

Those who serve as paid ministers among Friends live in a dynamic tension of serving as spiritual guides while remaining fellow spiritual travelers of a local congregation. It's very much like the role — not of other Christian pastors — but of a rabbi.

I am not proposing that we paid ministers in the Society of Friends begin to call ourselves rabbis. Instead, the sixth part of my modest proposal is to drop the term pastor in favor of a new name that I think gets back to the original intent of the pastoral system among Friends and indeed, back to ministry among Friends.

If Not Pastors, What?

Before I get to my proposed name change, let me say just a bit more about why I think it's time for a change. I'll make it explicit — and that is the idea in the minds of many (primarily programmed Friends) that minister is synonymous with pastor. And that ain't necessarily so — or at least it shouldn't be. We Quakers have long recognized various gifts of ministry. But this creeping clergyism is too quickly leading to the inevitable (I think) conclusion that the only ministry that is recognized is that of pastor.

That's already happening in some places. I live within the geographical confines of one yearly meeting and am a member of the yearly meeting “next door.” I am a congregational consultant, which I consider very much a ministry. Yet, because I am not a pastor, I am not included in any mailings for ministers -- other than the yearly report I am asked to complete to demonstrate that I am using my ministry gifts. I am not invited to Pastor Short Courses, luncheons, retreats, information/training sessions, etc. It is as if, even though I have been a recorded minister for 30 years now, that I am not considered a minister by these yearly meetings since I am not a pastor.

I know I'm not the only recorded minister who has experienced this.

Another thing I worry about is, if we start using the title “Pastor” can there be a “Bishop” (in name or action) far behind? I fear we are closing in on the attitude, if not the title, already. And this goes against our call to present the Gospel of direct communication with God without a need for rite, ritual, or clergy.

So what do I propose? I have thought a long time about this and here's my ungainly name — “released minister.”

I think it's a good name for a number of reasons — two of which I'll address here. One is that it gets us back to the idea of what we name all Friends. We are all ministers, are we not? Or at least we're supposed to be. Let's start by calling our paid staff person by the same name we all need to be going by.

Another is that this name will have to be explained. If, upon meeting somebody for the first time and they inquire about how I spend my days and I say that I am the pastor of Podunk Friends Church, they immediately know what that means based on their experience of what a pastor does. But if I say, “I'm the released minister at Podunk Friends” then I have, as Desi Arnaz used to say, some ‘splainin' to do. I then get to tell how we Friends believe that we are each ministers and that I am fortunate enough to have been released from seeking full time secular employment to use my ministry gifts in the service of the other ministers. I think that can be a powerful witness.

I think it also gives other Friends a chance to witness — and relearn — the amazing fact that we are all ministers. If we aren't allowed to say “She's our pastor” anymore and say “She's our released minister,” then it is, like above, an opportunity to say what we believe about ministry and why. Which means, of course, that Friends need to be educated enough in our Gospel message that they can articulate it.

Another thing I think this title could help us do is to focus on what are we calling a staff person to come do for and with us as a local congregation. We could then move from some boiler-plate job description of pastor handed down by a committee from the Yearly Meeting to developing a position that meets our needs. We would then have to ask, what are we releasing someone to do? To preach? To visit the sick and dying? To teach us? What do we need done by a paid staff person that we cannot (*not will not*) do ourselves?

This then allows us to match the person and her or his gifts with the Meeting and its expressed needs. It is not about developing a professional quasi-clergy profession where congregations advertise for a pastor and everyone's resume looks the same because the job has been the same from location to location. What a joy to match gifts and strengths to a people and place that can make use of them in unique ways.

It also allows us to recover the Friendly idea that there are many types of ministry. A large Meeting might have released ministers serving as pastors, youth ministers, pastoral counselors, chaplains in local institutions and more. No one is senior pastor versus junior pastor — all gifts and people are equally respected.

I think the title “released minister” is one that could be used for paid staff in unprogrammed meetings, too. It is no less arcane, and certainly more descriptive, than titles such as Meeting secretary.

Notice in this idea of the name change, I have nowhere advocated for an end to paid and/or trained ministers. While Friend George did say that “being bred at Oxford and Cambridge did not qualify or fit a man to be a minister of Christ,” it doesn't necessarily hurt, either. I think we Friends can be well served by women and men who are trained in congregation administration, religious education, preaching, counseling, and the like. And if a woman or man feels called to serve Friends full time and her or his gifts in ministry are confirmed by the Meeting or Yearly Meeting or whatever, then she or he should be compensated.

Yes, this may all seem to be a bit idealistic. If so, I plead guilty. And yet, it seems to me, that the Quaker message is an idealistic one — a Gospel that calls us — and expects us — to experience God individually in community. Our paid staff people should be empowered to help us keep to that ideal through various ministry roles. To be a released minister — instead of pastor — would be, I think, immensely freeing. If, that is, one truly cares about being a Friend of Jesus and not about being in a position of power or titular authority.

I thought a lot about what term to use for my proposal and settled on “released minister” because to me it spoke more to what I was proposing than did the term “released Friend.” That's a term I've hear before and while I have no objection to it, it seems a bit vague. Released for what? I want to recapture this sense that we are all ministers — and hence each bear responsibility for the quality of ministry that occurs in our meetings, programmed or not.

I am aware of how the recording of ministers has fallen out of favor and into disuse among certain branches of Friends. My proposal is that it should be restored in spite of years of disuse.

I would argue (perhaps I should say posit — sounds Friendly-er and less war-like) that recording should move out of the hands of Yearly Meeting committees and back to local Meetings. Encourage local Friends congregations to recognize those among them who exhibit gifts of ministry — and empower them to exercise those gifts.

On reader of the original post when this appeared suggested that perhaps we use the word “hireling.” I dislike the term hireling for a number of reasons, not least of which is its historically pejorative nature within our society. But mostly I dislike it because it is not at all descriptive — other than implying a person's role is defined not by what she or he does but rather because he or she takes money to do it. To call me a hireling of the Center for Congregations, while accurate in the sense that they pay me to drive to the office daily and do work while there, gives no indication of what I do — work I feel called to.

Perhaps, as a longtime hireling minister-type, I'm just too sensitive.

Institutional Relevance

A year or so ago, after an address I was giving to and for Quakers, during the question and answer period a woman asked me if I thought their Yearly Meeting would ever reach agreement on a new version of Faith and Practice. I said, “Tell me more” and she went on to explain that they had been struggling with coming up with a new version for a number of years and were not seemingly able to agree on a new edition.

After hearing that, I said that I doubted they would reach agreement unless they returned to an older model of Faith and Practice — one that more resembled the *1967 Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends* of London Yearly Meeting than it does the *Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church or the Presbyterian *Book of Order*.

The “old” *Christian Faith and Practice* is filled with, as the title implies, the experiences of Friends regarding important faith issues and their practice — God, the Bible, worship, family life, and more. It is instructional in an illuminating — not dictatorial — way.

But many books of Faith and Practice are becoming imitations of other Protestant denominations’ books of discipline. This indicates that a creeping denominationalism has moved more into many of our Yearly Meetings, making them look and act more like Protestant judicatories like synods or presbyteries or dioceses than a Quaker institution. According to one definition, a judicatory “is an administrative structure or organization found in a religious denominations between the local congregation and the ... [body] which is [a] higher court. ... the judicatory can have decisive authority over a local church, can offer standing for clergy members, ...”

This court language is especially dangerous — especially in light of some things going on in certain largely programmed Yearly Meetings. It’s dangerous because it shifts the emphasis from a focus on serving local congregations to the local congregations being subservient to and under the direction of the Yearly Meeting. And plays into the potential for power plays and an increasing disconnect between the Yearly Meetings and the local meetings.

I am not advocating anarchy. We Friends say we are about Gospel order. I agree. And there is much written in the Bible and other places about what Gospel order means and how to follow it. What I am against is an institutionalism that is dedicated to keeping institutions alive – or to get rid of anyone (or meeting or group) that disagrees with the institutional hierarchy.

So part seven of my modest proposal is that Yearly Meetings and other Friends bodies (whether they are centuries old, decades old or relatively new) stop and do serious examination of their purpose and programs. By that, Friends (and the institutions) need to ask things such as

- Why do we have Yearly Meetings or other institutions?
- What is their role?
- What is their purpose?
- Why were they created?
- Does that need still exist?

- What are they doing that needs to continue to be done?
- Is there a better way of doing these things?
- Is the institution serving the needs of the local Meetings or are the Meetings serving the needs of the institution

Further, I think these larger institutions and their staff and constituencies need to look at every program and staff position and ask the question “How does this fit with our mission — our *raison d’être*?” We shouldn’t be asking “Is it good or worthy?” Many programs and staff people may be good and worthy, but they may also detract from the institution’s primary purposes. In which case the organization then does not do the ministry for which it was created.

I fear we spend too much time staffing boards and committees that may no longer be needed — simply because Faith and Practice tells us that we need X number of representatives from each Meeting, Quarterly Meeting or whatever to serve on such and such a board. We spend too much time hearing reports, doing a little bit of business, while rarely taking time to ask, “Is this what God is calling us to at this time?”

It is my contention that the primary purpose of these larger institutions at this particular time should be

- to serve the local meetings and their needs (which means asking them how best to do that!)
- asking God where we should be taking the Quaker message and supporting folks ala the Valiant 60 to do that
- nurturing groups of Young Adult Friends (at colleges or in cities where there are no organized Friends Meetings) by supplying leaders at those places

Of course, there are many nuances to the three things above. They can be parsed a number of ways depending upon an institution’s answer to some queries

- Who are we?
- Why do we exist — what’s our mission?
- What is God calling us to be and do?
- How do we relate to our constituency?
- How do we adapt to change?
- Are we willing to adapt to change?

These questions seem vital to me — especially if our larger institutions want to become or remain vital. The questions need to be asked regularly. They can’t be answered once and for all time. If the organizations don’t ask these questions — and engage the people served by them in a discussion of the questions — then the organizations, no matter how worthy or long-lived up until now, will become increasingly anachronistic. They will then either die or be replaced by new organizations that spring up to meet the

needs they are not fulfilling. New Organizations that are mission driven, leaner, think faster on their feet, and adapt to the needs of the people and groups that created them.

If our current organizations cannot be reformed, perhaps it is time for re-forming. Or at least for forming new alliances/organization that meet the needs and marry faith and practice.

In some ways, I think that is why groups such as Friends General Conference, Friends United Meeting, and Evangelical Friends International came into being. There was a need and something new was born. The same is true for Earlham School of Religion and Friends World Committee — and countless other Quaker groups.

It is, I think, the nature of institutions to become frozen in their ways — no matter how well intentioned they are. And sometimes they need to be superseded with something fresh and new that allows room for the Spirit to move. I think we are at that time — and so must risk having the conversations.

And I want to make it clear that I am not just talking about Yearly Meetings. I am talking about all Friends organizations — if we want to revitalize the Quaker message. This includes groups like FUM & FGC, FWCC, our seminaries and colleges, and so on.

Perhaps it is an impossible task — but I hope that at least some of our groups and people will say, the time has come to ask, “What is God calling us to do?”

That’s one way to look at how early Quakerism came into being — as a fresh way to communicate a Gospel that had been boxed in by institutionalism, rites, rituals, clergy, and books. Fox and the early Friends sprung up in reaction to and against that.

What would they think of us today?

What's in a Name?

This is the final installment in my modest proposal. There are lots of specific proposals that I could make (about outreach, use of new media, and more) but they are really outside the scope of this series, which was to paint some big ideas with fairly broad strokes and to invoke the art critic in people who care about the future of the Friends message and get them to respond. So, to that end, here's one more probably improbable proposal.

Let's change our name.

YIKES!!! He can't be serious???

Ah, but he is. While I dearly love "Religious Society of Friends" and am even proud to be a humble Quaker, I'm not sure that either really help us share our message.

I'll concede to keeping "Quaker." It has a homey, friendly appeal -- thanks in no small part to a certain breakfast cereal conglomerate and a nostalgic view that folks outside our Society have when they hear that word.

But Religious Society of Friends says ... um... nothing to people outside of our little group. So let's dump it in favor of some simpler, more descriptive phrase.

How about "Friends of Jesus?"

OMG!! Jesus?

Well, as I recall, we took the name Friends because a certain Biblical figure uttered some words that we liked — "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you." (John 15:14 & 15, KJV).

And who was the Biblical personage who uttered those words? Hmmm ... Jesus!

Now, before I am accused of being totally ignorant of the breadth of Friends theological thinking and language and some Friends dislike of the name (if not the person) of Jesus, I know that this will stick in some Quaker craws. It does in mine just a bit — especially during those times that Jesus' words bug me. And I'm pretty sure some members of my family won't like it. But, it does get back to the intent behind the early Friends calling themselves Friends. They were — or at least hoped to be — the friends of Jesus.

Think of how it would simplify how we identify ourselves to outsiders — or those we hope to attract? What would it be like to invite someone to visit the Friends of Jesus in Plainfield instead of Plainfield Friends Church? Or Plainville Friends of Jesus instead of Plainville Friends Meeting?

Sounds sort of fresh and new and Biblical and ... um... George Fox-y, doesn't it?

I think it could have a special appeal to those folks who say they like Jesus and his message, but just aren't too sure about the church.

Of course, changing the name will not make any difference if the Friends of Jesus are just the same old church/meeting dressed up in a new moniker. But the name itself is an invitation — and a challenge.

- Do we wish to live up to the potential of the original intent of our name?
- Do we, individually and corporately, want to be the friends of Jesus?
- To live and move and have our being in the same Spirit that inspired the women and men who founded our movement?
- To do whatsoever God commands us?
- To live our faith daily within a community of belief and seeking God, held in a soulful tension of learning and growing?

Ah, it's only a name. Or is it?

Now it is time to “come clean.” I broke the Quaker testimony of truth-telling — I was not serious about renaming ourselves the “Friends of Jesus.” I don't like the name Friends of Jesus at all — it seems too restrictive and too loose at the same time.

This point was to be hyperbolic and over the top — to get people to at least think/react to what we ought to keep and what we ought to discard. And what could be much more hyperbolic than proposing a name change that is not needed — a mark of absurdity!

Changing names would be, to me, a bit like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic — an exercise that makes you feel like you're doing something, but really doesn't make a darn bit of difference. And it seems to me that we do plenty of that when we are concerned with keeping the institution of Quakerism alive instead of promoting the Friendly gospel message.

It was my hope, by putting it last (as a proposal), it would be so outrageous that people would say, well, he's over the top there, but some of the others are worth thinking about. I hope they are — and offer them in the spirit of helpfulness.

The call to revitalize the Quaker message is an important one. It is laden with possibilities and peril. But the peril is greater if we do not live up to the call we've been given — to be the Friends of the Divine, to invite others to come know that One who can speak to their condition, to worship the living God in spirit and in truth, and to bear His Light in this darkening world.



A Modest Proposal

by
J. Brent Bill

For the revitalization of the Quaker Message
in the United States