Chapter 1: Dilemma of Gospel Ministry in the 21st Century

Anyone who feels a concern for the Gospel ministry these days—that is, ministry that arises from, proclaims, and reaches to the life of the Gospel as Friends have understood it—faces several challenges which can be discouraging, and call into question the very notion of such a concern. Some of these challenges are specific to modern Quaker culture. Some are reflections of the broader society. Many of them challenge the life of faith itself. Perhaps another way to say this is, we are often unsure of what the Gospel is, and whether it should be preached, or its life encouraged; and we have a constricted view of what it may be. It behooves every Friend, but especially those who speak in ministry, to recognize and engage with these tensions honestly, with intellect, heart, and soul, because in them lie many of the spiritual challenges which we all face. The following are those which have seemed most pressing to me; doubtless you will think of others to add.

1. A tendency to restrict the room for divine activity in our lives.

Friends as a group are as infected as most members of our society with a strong reliance on human reason and strength. We constantly canvass the best ideas and opinions that we find in our workplaces and social or political life, and then make decisions in what might be called a business-like manner, with only a hazy view of how the decision grows out of and relates to the divine life of the Holy Spirit. This is not because we do not care about divine life, but because we tend to seek divine guidance only in moments of high stress, or in important decisions about big questions. Yet we forget that our discernment is likely to be better when we come to such big issues after we have been practicing on the small things, both in our meetings and in our daily lives.
2. The fragmentation of the Quaker movement.

The divisions among Friends are long-established historical trends, which have characteristic realizations in each nation. While in places like Britain or Kenya the theological variations are held in uneasy solution within Yearly Meetings; in North America, these trends took on substantive expression in umbrella organizations such as Friends United Meeting, Evangelical Friends International, and Friends General Conference. These associations arose in response to a sincere desire for effective witness and mutual support, and as a partial gesture towards unity. They have also, to some extent, institutionalized a state of faction. Each “branch” in North America has developed its preferred religious language, literature, customs, and organizations.

For many Friends, and perhaps especially the majority of unprogrammed Friends, the consciousness of this remarkable diversity has made it hard to speak with any sense of confidence about the relationship between our subjective life, the central assertions and discoveries of Quakerism, and the life of the world at large. Respect for individual experience, a fundamental Quaker value from the earliest times, is now accompanied by modern developments that loosen or eliminate our connections with our religious tradition, including the post-modern response to a diverse world. We find it hard or impossible to speak with joy and confidence out of a shared experience of the work of Christ in and through us. Early Friends were remarkably diverse as well, yet they still felt unity, not in their beliefs primarily, but in their understanding of their center: the Light of Christ which was the key to their experience.

3. A secular view of time.

People have always been liable to be so absorbed in their business, family, and other affairs that they do not reserve substantive time for prayer and reflection. This is not a malady of the twenty-first century alone, but a persistent feature of human life. The sources of this busyness are many; beyond a certain point it is not because of necessity. Rather, in activity we feel our reality. In some kinds of activity, we establish or reinforce our importance to others, or make an argument to ourselves about our own value. Moreover, it cannot be denied that
activity sometimes provides us with escape from ourselves, and also from confronting the activity that Friends call Truth which is likely to be met in silence and stillness.

While these things are not new, it may well be that our modern society has created more means of distraction and empty activity than have ever existed before. How great a fear there is, in our culture, that we might not exercise every possible choice, or that we should ever accept any constraint upon our freedom! It is seen as positively good to always be in reach of friends, family, work, and the marketplace; and in the activity of communication and participation in the culture, we find a defense against our fear of aloneness.

Yet there is nothing that will kill a concern, and the growth of one’s ability to carry it faithfully, more quickly than an overactive mind. The habits of too much activity, too much stimulation, and too much communication, can keep us stunted spiritually, preempting the faculties of prayer and reflection. These distractions can shield us from more important things in which we would rather not engage.

4. The consumer approach to religion.

Since the beginning of the Quaker movement, people coming in to the Society of Friends have brought with them all kinds of baggage—personal, social, theological. I can attest to this personally. Commonly enough, we incomers have unpacked these bags in a way that influenced the Quakerism we joined, or at least the Quakerism we were able to experience.

However, the last 100 years have seen a remarkable, double change. On the one hand, the proportion of “convinced Friends” has become much larger than the proportion of Friends who have grown up in the tradition (in some yearly meetings it is by far the largest group). On the other hand, Quakers of whatever genesis have become much more complete participants in the surrounding culture, which has become eclectic and consumer-oriented to an extreme, even with respect to spirituality and religion.

The consequent intensified sense of personal search in a global marketplace has made it possible for Friends to hunt diligently in many different traditions for knowledge and practices that give them some
sense of comfort, insight, or renewal. For my part, I have been glad to learn from several traditions, including those I was raised in before I found Friends.

Yet there are costs as well as benefits deriving from this eclecticism, and especially for the ministry in unprogrammed worship. One of the most regrettable consequences has been the loss of a deep exploration of Quakerism’s resources as a major spiritual path which makes demands upon the adherent, pulling him or her out of a place of ease, rather than being a construction conformable in most things to his or her personal preferences. In previous times, Quakers spoke of the Cross, of the death of self, when explaining how the Spirit led them beyond their own preferences and habits. Modern Friends feel less comfortable with such language, but the reality of the experience is a foundation of any claim that we are experiencing some aspect of divine Truth and engaged with a living God that is not created in our own image. It takes time to understand the implications of the Quaker understanding of the life of the soul, and the resources it offers in the challenges of life. Coming into “that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars”—reaching to that life, and making it yours, is the work of a lifetime. It is that Life, as sought, struggled with, learned from, and embodied, which is where words come from which nourish, guide, warn, and encourage the soul.

5. Uncertainties about leadership, and communities inexperienced in caring for gifts and callings.

We are uncomfortable about the idea of leadership, and we are not clear how leadership should look among Friends. There are many reasons for our discomfort. One source of the problem rests upon a misconception about what leadership or authority is. Too often, it is related in our minds to the exercise of power or influence, as in political or corporate life.

There is no question that some Friends who have grown to positions of authority have exercised it injuriously at times. James Jenkins, an English Friend of the 18th Century, describes how some ministering Friends (as well as many of the elders) assumed a kind of authoritarian tone that he (understandably) found repellent:
I have noticed, that at the Yearly Meeting, we had the company of Samuel Emlen, Nicholas Waln, George Dillwyn, and John Pemberton [all visitors from America] . . . who, altho’ they often preached excellently to us, yet, in the meetings for discipline, they frequently took the lead . . . in that sort of dictatorial meddlement in the business of the meetings, which is seldom taken by modest strangers—even to apposite remarks, answers frequently abrupt, and sometimes rude, were given by them, and if this happened to provoke a rejoinder of censure or reproof, they stood up, and defended each other, with all the faithfulness, and zeal of true, confederacy. (Jenkins 1984, 185)

More often, a less dark arrogance still caused harm to individuals and meetings and damaged the credibility of the ministry. For example, James Jenkins described how the prominent minister Catherine Phillips:

like a great Autocratrix, sometimes governed, and sometimes without succeeding attempted to govern. . . . To an austerity of conduct that had much the appearance of domination, she added a sourness of temper, that disgraced the woman, and assumed an over-bearing consequence which (at least I thought) an humble minister of the Gospel could not assume. (Jenkins 1984, 118)

Moreover, abuses occurring in past eras are not unknown today, in modern form among Friends. People are very liable to prefer to have their own way when they can get it, and as hierarchical creatures, humans slip very easily into habits of command or control, overt or covert. Yet such abuses are not typically the biggest problem facing a meeting, in regard to the identification and support of gifts. More often, we are over-cautious and unsure how to proceed. Meetings may not see a need for any care of their members’ gifts, or they may fear that by addressing them, they will encourage the growth of undesirable distinctions, hierarchies, preferences, or egotism. Furthermore, we can see how purposefully undertaking some care of the gifts among our members could lead to mistaken judgments, even conflict.

It is a severe misfortune that for such reasons we are backward about accepting and nurturing gifts that can serve the life of the Spirit among us. As a result, many gifts are not cultivated and disciplined as they might be, and the life of the meeting is thereby diminished.
Does it matter that we have largely lost the corporate dimension of ministry? I think the answer is a resounding “Yes!” because the lack of corporate involvement and mutual accountability devalues the gift and diminishes the minister’s effectiveness. It discounts the seriousness and awe of recognizing a gift being given by God to the group. We are all spiritually impoverished. (Grundy 1999, 14)

Yet everything depends upon our keeping before our minds the recognition that spiritual authority as the Gospel teaches it derives from the love of God, and takes the form of service:

Jesus called them to him, and said, You know that the leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great exercise authority upon them. It shall not be so among you: rather, whosoever should wish to become great among you will be one who serves you, and whoever might want to be first among you, let him be your servant. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served, but rather to serve, and to give his life as a means of freeing many. (Mt. 20:25–28; my translation, and compare John 13:1–15).

The inward groundedness (humility) and teachableness which make this service possible and authentic (or authoritative) are not learned in a day, and must be relearned daily, under the many conditions of life.

6. A skepticism about ministry as a calling

Our unease and unskill at nurturing gifts is particularly acute with respect to Friends who carry a concern for a long period of time, and even more so for Friends with a concern for Gospel ministry. As a result, at present we have few living examples as patterns (or, I suppose, warning signs) from which an individual seeking to follow the concern, or a meeting seeking to nurture it, can draw guidance.

There are some who have felt that since any of us can at times be called to offer the ministry needed in a meeting for worship, there is no need to ascribe to the idea that there can be a separate “calling” to the ministry as a concern. While at first this makes sense, and accords with our increasingly democratic conception of the Society and the Commonwealth of God, it does not comport well with Scripture or with the experience of Friends over the past several centuries. However, the initial plausibility of this assertion is a warning and a reproof to us
all, because it suggests that fewer and fewer Friends have seen evidence in their own or others’ lives of the fruits of faithfulness to this concern. They don’t see evidence, or perhaps don’t know what to look for.

As William P. Taber writes:

In our time . . . many more people take occasional responsibility for the ministry, but there are relatively few ministers who have gone through the long and arduous experience of learning by discerning that was typical of most ministers (sometimes called public Friends) of the eighteenth century. (Bownas 1989, xxiv)

Lucia Beamish writes:

Of how many could it be said today, as it was said of Benjamin Seebohm . . . that “his ministry was the most characteristic thing about his life; more than anything else it was evidently that for which he lived.” (Beamish 1963)

It is for these reasons that I find it more effective and useful to speak of those for whom the Gospel ministry calls as carrying a concern. Modern Friends have many ways of talking about and working with concerns. Making appropriate use of these ideas and practices can help us explore the Gospel ministry in our day concretely and practically. It also enables us to consider what this concern has in common with other concerns—and in what ways it is unique.

7. The corrosion of false religion

We are in a time when faith is hard to sustain, and when many cultural voices, both secular and religious, describe kinds of faith, and in particular versions of Christianity, which feel deeply unsatisfactory when put to the tests of mind, heart, or soul. Religion is portrayed as a system of social control, or as the ally of the state, or the market, or of this or that party. Or again it is said to be a matter of purely private and subjective concern, an arrangement of your mental furniture according to your own taste, but irrelevant to anyone else, and possibly just an accidental result of biological evolution.

There are many ways in which humanity is ailing, and one of these ways is a kind of heartsickness that arises because the Christianoi, the little Christs, have so often sided against the Gospel. They deny their
failures and claim allegiance with the Gospel’s words, but in their actions exhibit hearts that seem strangers to the Lord they claim, who is both servant and teacher, shepherd and lamb, the one who seeks, and the one who knows what it is to be lost.

Who will trust their testimony, who will trust my testimony, if it is given in Christ’s name anymore? I often reflect upon the implications of John Woolman’s dream, in which he says:

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved, for his name to me was precious. Then I was informed that these heathens were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ, and they said amongst themselves: If Christ directed them to use us in this sort, then Christ is a cruel tyrant. (Woolman 1971, 185–6)\(^5\)

Yet, if we dare, Friends can uphold a different view, even while acknowledging the strong reasons many have for rejecting religion or Christianity. Our religion is based on our friendship with Christ, walking as children of the Light, and should lead us into a recognizable life. True religion should bear the fruits of the spirit: love that casts out fear, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, justice, simplicity, and the commitment to overcome evil with good, and not to return evil for evil. None other can we accept. We are empowered to bear these fruits as we welcome the birth of Christ’s Spirit in us, and allow that life to put to death “whatever is of a nature contrary to itself,” as we wait in silence, worship and work in fellowship, and act on the guidance we are given. We are called to holiness, and of a kind that (for all the diversities of our natures and gifts) is given characteristic shape by the nature and work of Christ’s spirit.

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\(^5\) The preceding three paragraphs taken from Drayton 1996.