Quaker-pocalypse: Spiritual Lukewarmness and Spiritual Formation

Spiritual lukewarmness

*I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot.*  
(Revelation 3:15)

In my original post on Quaker-pocalypse, I listed among the signs of our decline, the decline of personal and family devotional life, shallowness in the meeting for worship, and a corresponding infrequency of gathered meetings for worship. In a phrase—spiritual lukewarmness: The meeting feels good; nobody is really unhappy. Nobody is really going anywhere, spiritually, either. No one—or too few—are on fire with the holy spirit. Nobody can remember when the last gathered meeting was. Some Friends aren’t really sure what that even means. But members do enjoy a precious sense of contentment that is hard to find in the world. This certainly is sweet.

However, Quaker renewal needs more. Mere contentment leads to continued decline, if only through the attrition brought on by the passing of our elders. Renewal needs a pentecost, an in-breaking of the holy spirit. And a pentecost needs minds and hearts and souls prepared.

Spiritual formation

In my earlier series on What is Quakerism for? I answered that question with a simple statement: to bring people to God and to bring God into the world. In the context of this series on Quaker decline and renewal, I would say that the way to Quaker renewal is not to focus so much on ourselves and on our problems, but rather to get busy bringing people to God, to the holy—helping make people whole—and by healing the hurts of the world.

So how do we bring people to God? How can our meetings help our members and attenders and our children and the people who come to us as seekers find the holy in their lives and become more whole? What more can we do to invite the pentecost?

The first three prerequisites, I believe, are: prayer, worship, and earnest desire for G*d in our lives, our personal lives and our collective lives as meetings. These are non-programmatic. You just do it. And it works. It worked for George Fox and it worked for those Seekers he convinced at Firbank Fell to jump-start our movement. They just earnestly prayed and worshipped.

However, I do think there is a place for “program”, for programs of “spiritual formation”—programs designed to help members and attenders discover the form or path in which to pursue the life of the spirit as a Friend in a way that speaks to their own condition.

We each have our own past and our own past experiences, our own wounds and our own wonderful milestones, and what I will call our own spiritual temperament. Though we each possess the potential for any spiritual path, most of us specialize. Most of us find ourselves focusing on or getting more out of certain aspects of spirituality. The three temperaments that we Friends readily recognize, I suspect, are the spiritualist/mystic, the social concern activist, and the Friend who seeks the communion of community. I think this idea of spiritual temperament deserves more attention than we can give it here, so I plan to return to the topic of religious temperament in a later post.
What I’m getting at is that no one size or shape of spirituality fits all. Ideally, the spiritual nurturers in the meeting would know the members well enough that it would be relatively clear what kinds of resources to put into a given individual’s hands.

But we don’t worship in ideal meetings. Knowing everyone that well in a large meeting is just impossible. Knowing each other even in small meetings takes effort; you have to do it. It takes time, patience, repetition, and some wisdom for us to get past the superficial and come to know each other “in that which is eternal”, as early Friends liked to put it. So programs have their place.

I imagine that if our meetings had lots of members who were clear about their way to God and were doing something about it, our meetings would also become more whole; the decline we experience would reverse, we would attract more people and grow. Though attracting people and growing are not the goals. Wholeness is the goal; the goal is the holy. Our mission is to bring people to God, not get new members.

So let’s get to it. What else could we be doing?

I imagine that if our meetings were offering our members and attenders, our children and our newcomers opportunities for spiritual sharing, learning, and exploration—programs focused on spiritual nurture—we would find ourselves renewed. Let me be more specific. I propose developing “programs” in our meetings for . . .

Sharing—opportunities to share . . .

• our personal *spiritual experiences*, especially the ones that have been formative for us, in open discussion groups, in worship sharing, or whatever; and opportunities to share

• our personal *spiritual practice*—what we do at home, if anything, in our personal devotional life; what we do during our time in meeting for worship; what vocal ministry means to us, and how we test our messages before speaking in meeting.

Learning—religious education programs on . . .

• *Quaker ministry*—programs on its faith and practice.

• *Quaker spirituality*—study groups that focus on spiritual classics and Quaker classics, biographies and journals, and Quaker faith and practice in the areas of personal spirituality.

• *Quaker corporate religious life*—programs on traditional gospel order, the gathered meeting, Quaker dialog, clearness committees, corporate discernment, meeting for worship and vocal ministry, meeting for worship with attention to the life of the meeting, the Advices & Queries, clerk and recording . . . etc.—the full, rich panoply of our peculiar and amazing shared tradition, but with, among other areas, a focus on the unique aspects of Quaker collective spirituality, *the spiritual life of the meeting*.

Experiencing—hands-on workshops or other opportunities to explore the life of the spirit more directly, as in . . .

• *Experiment with Light*—many Friends are finding the groups using Rex Ambler’s reconstruction of early Quaker spirituality very rewarding. He’s written several books.

• *Traditional spiritual disciplines*—especially, prayer, meditation, study, simplicity, solitude, and service, which seem especially suited to Friends practice (but see also Richard
Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* for good stuff on fasting, confession, spiritual guidance (more about this in a moment), and celebration; Foster was a Friend, after all). That is, study groups using written resources and workshops led by people who have experience in these disciplines, aimed at giving members and attenders exposure to a decent range of spiritual techniques, so that each person might find something that works for them.

- **Deepening techniques**, from self-hypnosis, yoga (including both meditation techniques and breathing exercises), and especially, centering prayer, since it comes from the Christian tradition, is very easy and very effective, and very compatible with Quaker practice. As Thomas Kelly put it in “The Gathered Meeting”, all that is needed for the authentic religious life is to genuinely turn toward the Light; no special techniques are required for that. However, there is no denying that deepening techniques do enrich the life of the spirit, and a little bit of training—or even just some reading—go a long way toward equipping the faithful with a kind of fast track to the depths within them.

- **Healing circles**—Does your meeting have any doctors, social workers, or therapists, people who clearly possess the gift of healing, and who have channeled their gifts through the traditional Western healing arts? Or people who practice alternative healing modalities? Or people who just feel called to pastoral care and healing work in general? How can you nurture their gifts as gifts of the spirit? Also, I know from personal experience that healing circles, however they are conducted, can channel healing energy to sometimes miraculous effect, even when the participants do not necessarily feel they have a special gift.

- **Proactive Quaker eldership**. By this I mean the traditional Quaker calling of some Friends to a ministry of raising up ministers. Some Friends (all Friends, potentially, and any Friend now and again) have a gift for recognizing and nurturing the gifts of others. The person in your meeting who realizes Friend Sally would probably get a lot out of a certain Quaker classic, or who urges someone who is holding back to speak in meeting, or who suggests a certain conference to Friend John . . . or whatever. Is your meeting recognizing and nurturing its elders, in addition to its ministers? Just as strong nonprofits will have a committee dedicated to building up its board of trustees, finding people to serve who have legal or accounting expertise, for instance, so every Quaker meeting should be proactively building up its capacity for spiritual nurture.

- **Spiritual nurture programs** like that which the School of the Spirit and some yearly meetings now offer. In many ways, we live now in a golden age of spiritual nurture among Friends, because there are so many places and resources for it. Meetings should do everything in their power to help members take these courses, which often require real commitment in terms of time, money, and meeting participation. The reward to the meeting of even one person deepening their spiritual life through such an experience is hard to overestimate.

- **Spiritual direction and spiritual friends**. Resident students at Pendle Hill meet with an advisor once a week and I found this mentoring program extremely rewarding when I was there. The formal pairing of mentor and student for “spiritual direction” is fairly common in many religious traditions and in some seminaries, but far less so among Friends. We have turned instead to spiritual friendships, which are oriented more toward mutual sharing and caring than toward some “vertical” “direction”. Still, spiritual
direction as a “movement” has been growing in popularity, I think, and becoming more accessible and ecumenical, if you will, less tied to institutions and traditional definitions. However, we do it, our meetings should be encouraging those members who clearly have a thirst for more to get together for mutual encouragement. I imagine this might often work best in the wider network of a quarterly or regional meeting, especially if your own meeting is rather small; more on this at the end.

• Conferences and workshops. The Quaker world is rich these days with conferences, workshops, and consultations that can deepen your spiritual life. Meetings should advertise these opportunities and help our members and attenders and children take advantage of them. I have mentioned Pendle Hill, which is outside of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania. There are also Quaker conference centers in northern New York State, Indiana, California, western Massachusetts, and probably other places I’m not aware of. Yearly Meetings and even local meetings sponsor these events, or have staff that can offer them locally. If not, yearly meeting worship and ministry committees, if they exist, could do the same. Friends General Conference has a lot of resources, not least the annual Gathering.

• Traveling Friends. Do you have a leading to enrich the spiritual lives of Friends or meetings? Is there someone in your meeting who clearly has such a leading—or at least a gift in this area—who has not yet thought of it as a prompting to travel with it to other meetings? Sometimes all that is needed for such a leading to mature is a little nudge, a little encouragement from someone they trust, a simple question: “Hast thee thought of traveling with this gift you have?”

Okay, but . . .

Many meetings will not have the resources to do a lot of the things I’ve described above. They may be too small, or just too lacking in the human resources required. I see two solutions for this problem.

The first is to make it a collective project. My old meeting is doing this with great success, I think. Don’t have somebody who really knows about meditation, or vocal ministry. Ask for a couple of people to volunteer to do some studying. Go to quakerbooks.org and do a search for your topic. Rifle through your meeting’s library—if it doesn’t have what you need, order it. Then, when they are ready, have a gathering and share. Keep doing this and in a while, everybody who attends these gatherings will know more and the Friends who took on the study will know quite a lot.

The second solution is to bring in outside resources. Somebody in your quarter or your yearly meeting probably has the knowledge and experience you are looking for. Finding them might be a little difficult, but every quarter or yearly meeting has some Friends who are natural networkers, who seem to know everybody and to know what’s going on. Those Friends will be easier to find and they might be able to point you in the right direction.

Here is a condensed version of programs that meetings might try to deepen the spiritual lives of their members, attenders, and children and youth.
**Spiritual Nurture Meeting Checklist**

**Sharing**
- Simple gatherings in which you invite a Friend to share their spiritual journey, or their spiritual practice. or
- in which, in worship sharing format, groups of you can share these things.

**Learning**
- Religious education programs on
  - spiritual gifts
  - Quaker ministry
  - Quaker spirituality
  - Quaker corporate religious life

**Experiencing**
- Experiment with Light groups
- Workshops on
  - traditional spiritual disciplines
  - deepening techniques
- Healing circles
- Recognize and encourage your elders, and point those appointed to your worship and ministry committee in the direction of more proactive eldership, in the positive sense of spiritual nurture
- Help members attend spiritual nurture programs and conferences
- Encourage spiritual friendships
- Seek out traveling Friends, both within your own meeting (they may only be potential travelers) and those who might travel to you