

21st Century Quakerism: Introduction – Session 1 Outline

April 15, 2018

1. Welcomes & housekeeping

- Pass sign-in sheet (name and contact info: email or mailing address; phone)
- Facilitators introduce themselves
- Brief introduction to Jacksonville Friends Meeting (history, current community involvement, etc.)
- Orientation to FCC and the activities building
- Brief overview of series design
- Brief participant introductions – name, 1 or 2 personal details (community & religious activities, etc.)

2. What resources will we use?

- *Quakerism 101: A Basic Course for Adults*, by Shirley Dodson (1992)
 - We use the out-of-print 1998 edition from Adult Religious Education, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
- *The Quaker Way: a rediscovery*, by Rex Ambler (2013)
 - Jacksonville Friends have 10 copies (*for a contribution, if possible*)
 - From Quaker Books at quakerbooks.org/products/the-quaker-way-21 (\$19.99 plus shipping)

3. Aims of the series

- "Modern people don't feel moved or impressed just by living. In order to do so, we need to keep the silence and examine ourselves."
 - Roshi Gensho Hozumi, *In Pursuit of Silence*, documentary directed by Patrick Shen (2015), www.pursuitofsilence.com
- The aim of this series is to give participants opportunities to experiment with the Quaker way. There will be reading and discussion and verbal sharing of experiences. However, this is not to be an intellectual course but, rather, a shared *experience*.

Distribute Handout 1.1 – The Quaker Way

- In *The Quaker Way*, Rex Ambler writes:

The Quaker way...is based on a practice of silence, the deliberate letting go of words and ideas. It is an attempt to get beyond all the things we say and write about our life to a direct experience of it.... (3)

Quakers sit in silence because they want to know something that words cannot tell them. They want to feel something or become aware of something that they can really make connection with. (11)

- We are offering this series for three sets of people:
 - people who are interested in and curious about Quakerism
 - Quakers who have not yet found the spiritual depth they sense could be available to them
 - Quakers who have found such depth, but don't know how to put it into words.

4. How will we take care of each other?

- We begin with a commitment to safety, mutual respect, clarity, and confidentiality
 - Group Agreement – Modeled on the *Alternatives to Violence Project* group agreements
 - The April 15th group agreed on the following:

non-judgmental	empathy & patience	clarity
no argument	confidentiality	active listening to understand
mutual respect, civility	the right to pass	safe to share when uncomfortable with something
tolerance	I-language	

- People use different languages to talk about inward experiences of truth in the heart: traditional religious languages, spiritual languages, non-religious languages, etc.
 - Use of different languages by group members offers both a challenge and an opportunity.
 - Challenge – Some people had negative past experiences with religion, so religious language becomes a "trigger."
 - Opportunity – We might just listen to other people's uses of their own language. *Language* is twice removed from experience, trying to represent *concepts* that try to represent *experience*.
 - This is one of those areas where it is easy for judgment to slip in.
- We are not seeking to come to agreement as a group
 - Instead, we are seeking to learn from each other's different discoveries
 - *We may experience surprise, puzzlement, disagreement, or even delight over our different approaches to the same concerns.*

5. Worship sharing & Quaker queries

Distribute Handout 1.2 – "Quaker Queries" & "Worship Sharing Guidelines"

- Introduce the practice of Quaker queries (page 1 of handout)

Queries are questions that guide personal and group reflection on how our lives and actions are shaped by Love and Truth. The emphasis is on how to live a life more completely aligned with the life of the spirit.

Quakers often find Queries a powerful spiritual discipline. Returning again and again to the same prompt for deep reflection can set the stage for new understandings, changes of heart, and a rising sense of loving action that needs to be taken.

If you can answer a Query with a "yes" or "no," try to grapple a bit more adding "why," "how," and "when" to the original query.

—from "A Word about Quaker Queries,"
created by New England Yearly Meeting,
Friends General Conference www.fgcquaker.org

- Review guidelines for worship sharing (page 2 of handout)

Worship sharing is a method for speaking from our own experience instead of doing intellectual discussion or debate.

We use I-statements to remind ourselves that we are speaking about our personal experience, not that of others. In turn, we listen in an open and accepting way to the thoughts and experiences of others, without making any critical judgments.

There is no need to come to conclusions or provide a summary. If members of a group would like to share their insights or raise questions in discussion afterwards, this can be beneficial, but it is not necessary. The experience of a worship sharing group can be complete in itself.

—based on Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Quakerism 101*

6. Worship sharing on the first query

What am I curious about that has moved me to take part in this study series? How do I feel about sharing my personal path of exploration with others?

BREAK

7. A brief introduction to Quaker faith and practice

- **Quaker terms of address**

- **Friends** – As early as 1653, the first Quakers called themselves "Friends of Truth," or simply "Friends."
- **Quakers** – In 1650 Justice Bennett of Derby used the word "Quaker" as a derogatory term in response to George Fox's admonition to his followers to "tremble at the Word of the Lord." The word was already used in England for foreign sects given to fits of shaking during religious fervor.
- Modern Quakers use either term, but we address each other as "Friends."

- **Faith and practice**

This phrase identifies a key difference between Quakerism and many other religious traditions.

The Quaker way of life, the Quaker way to life, is essentially practical. Whatever else we do as Quakers...we come back to the practice again and again. That attitude itself needs some explaining.... But notice here the difficulty it creates. The Quaker way of life is very simple, once you grasp it, but actually grasping it may not be so easy. It is so different from other ways of doing things....

—Rex Ambler, *The Quaker Way*, "Introduction" (5-6)

- **Belief systems** – Most traditional religions have *belief systems*, usually specifically worded statements of what members are expected to agree to—and perhaps even "prove" that they believe. But remember,

Language is twice removed from experience, trying to represent concepts that try to represent experience.

- Instead of a belief system, Quakers depend upon a living, dynamic interaction between two realities

- **Faith** – what we have learned to trust about sacred reality
- **Practice** – the ways we try to live according to that faith in our day-to-day lives.

- **Quaker faith** –

"Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God, whose Light shows us our darkness and leads us to new life."

—George Fox, quoted by Rex Ambler in *The Quaker Way* (9)

- Quakers do not reject scripture or religious tradition as sources of divine revelation.
- However, *our faith is in the experience of direct and continuing revelation from God.*
 - We are confident that all people are in a loving relationship with God, whether or not they know it, and that
 - All people can be taught by the inward presence of God—called variously "the light," "the seed," "the inward Christ," "that of God," and so on.

- **Quaker practice** –

- Quakers sit in silence, stilling their thoughts and feelings, until they are able to sense the "still small voice" within.

And behold, the Lord passed by [Elijah], and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.

—1 Kings 19:11b-12

- **Guarding against self-serving notions**

Quakers seek to discern the difference between the promptings of ego and genuine leadings of "the light."

- Quakers in the 17th century were severely persecuted by the Church of England as reckless people who, as Ambler writes,

...are not only self-centered but also irresponsible, indifferent to the public good. And being driven by "fancies" they would be indifferent to the rules and procedures that had been laid down by authority. They were a threat to the threat to the establishment. (10)

- 21st century folk are also often skeptical of Quakers.

[Friends] are seen by many people to be unreliable in another way: they rely on inner impulses which they take, supposedly, to be an infallible guide to living. They are living against the grain of society....

Modern society is upfront, rational and devoted to common sense. Friends, in contrast, seem to be relying on impulses that moderns can only regard with suspicion. (10)

- Contrary to these criticisms, Quakers embrace a *discernment practice* to protect each other from delusional beliefs and selfish actions.
 - When we affirm that all people can receive direct and continuing revelation of truth, we mean *the same truth*...even if each of us understands it differently.
 - In Quaker discernment we bring personal leadings to fellow Friends for testing.
 - Each person considers silently and shares whatever clarity has been received.
 - [Give an example.]

9. Wrap-up discussion & planning

- Is there anything more you want more clarity on before we end this session?
- Discuss future scheduling issues (e.g., May 13th instead of May 20th) and potluck contributions, etc.

10. Homework to prepare for Session 2: Finding the Truth

- *Reading* – Introduction and Chapter 1 of Rex Ambler's *The Quaker Way*.
- *Practice* – Pay attention to times when insights or ideas come to you, and see if you can become more aware of how they come to you.
- *Query* – *If you could describe your life and your work in terms of "faith" and "practice," how might you do that?*