

# On speaking in Meeting for Worship



## Speaking in Meeting for Worship

One of the most perplexing aspects of Quakerism for newcomers, and sometimes also for those not so new, is its apparent lack of rules, creeds and authority figures. Much can be gleaned by observing how Friends conduct themselves, but there are some common Quaker procedural conventions that contribute to comfortable participation in Meetings for Worship.

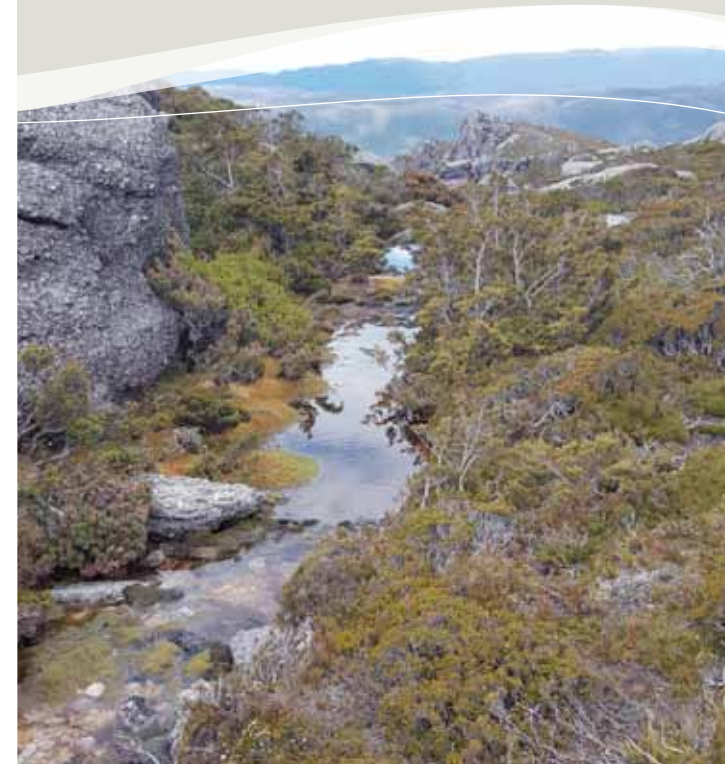
Meeting for Worship begins when the first person sits down in the meeting room at, or more commonly several minutes before, the appointed time. It is therefore desirable, for both one's own tranquillity of mind and the silence of this place of worship, not to talk much outside beforehand.

Once the Meeting has settled, free from 'the noises and hurries of the mind', as William Penn put it, comes the creativity of a good Meeting for Worship. We move from our personal concerns via an unfolding awareness of broader community and universal concerns into what we call 'the Light'. This is an experience beyond discussion or debate, requiring not a critical mind but a reaching beyond our surface minds. In the words of Psalm 51:10, 'Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me'. It is from this depth that the most inspired ministry will arise.

Quakers believe that out of the silence, the communion with the Spirit, may come a message to be shared with the meeting. The message may come to one person or another, to be shared as speech, or prayer or (more rarely) as song. Sometimes there is no such ministry at all, but many of those present will have felt the communion during the silence.

*I sometimes think of a Meeting for Worship as a time when nobody speaks, but everybody listens. Sometimes a person is moved to listen aloud, and this transforms itself into spoken ministry.*

**Anon 1995, *this we can say*, 2.34**



One often-quoted piece of advice is to come to Meeting 'with heart and mind prepared' (*Advices and Queries*, 1964, no. 10). This does not mean coming with speech prepared. Rather, we wait on the Spirit together; we listen both to our own inner messages of the Spirit and to those that come through others. Being receptive, we listen with an open heart and mind and soul, allowing time after each message for it to be 'taken in', allowing time for worship.

*When you are preoccupied and distracted in meeting let wayward and disturbing thoughts give way quietly to your awareness of God's presence among us and in the world. Receive the vocal ministry of others in a tender and creative spirit. Reach for the meaning deep within it, recognising that even if it is not God's word for you, it may be so for others. Remember that we all share responsibility for the meeting for worship whether our ministry is in silence or through the spoken word.*

*Advices & Queries* 2008, no. 13

Modern Quakers continue to try to discern the leadings of the Spirit in their spoken ministry. Navigating between the hazards of messages that are meant only for oneself, messages more appropriate for one-on-one exchange and those best suited to open-forum debate or a political rally can be daunting. As a result, some people never speak in Meeting for Worship at all, and the meeting is poorer for it.

*Do not assume that vocal ministry is never to be your part. Faithfulness and sincerity in speaking, even very briefly, may open the way to a fuller ministry from others. When prompted to speak, wait patiently to know that the leading and the time are right, but do not let a sense of your own unworthiness hold you back. Pray that your ministry may arise from deep experience, and trust that words will be given to you. Try to speak audibly and distinctly, and with sensitivity to the needs of others. Beware of speaking predictably or too often, and of making additions towards the end of a meeting ...*

*Advices & Queries* 2008, no. 14

Vocal ministry has to be heard as well as given. Hence the advice to rise to one's feet, standing first to collect one's thoughts and then to project the voice and allow those with poorer hearing a chance to focus on the speaker's words. In a truly gathered meeting, the first contribution may well in a sense set the tone, triggering in others thoughts and feelings that result in the expression of a developing of theme or themes.

*'Waiting on the Spirit'— this is the quietness of the Quaker Meeting for Worship. It is amazing when you are in a room with a group of people, and you sense a gathering in the silence, and it is just that — waiting on the Spirit. Something magical happens, and answers to problems emerge out of the silence. Sometimes if you are wrestling with a problem or an issue in your life someone in the Meeting will say something that is just right for you at that moment. Yet some Meetings are absolutely silent, when nobody says anything for a whole hour, and they can be the most meaningful and deepest of all.*

Jo Vallentine, 1990, *this we can say*, 2:24

## RECOMMENDED READING

(may be available from Meeting House libraries)

*A Meeting's ministry*, Claire Groben Walker (1986), Studies in Quakerism No. 13.

*Advices and queries: a compilation of Australian and British advices and queries*, Australia Yearly Meeting, 2009 edition.

*Introduction: Quakers – the Religious Society of Friends*, BBC (2009) view online at: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers\\_1.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/quakers_1.shtml)

*On Speaking Out of Silence*, Douglas V. Steere (1972), Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 182.

*What to expect in a Quaker meeting for worship: 8 short videos for the Quaker curious*. Quaker Speak (2018) or view online at: <https://quakerspeak.com/video/what-to-expect-quaker-meeting-worship/>

*Silence and Speech: for anyone new to Quaker Worship*, Richard Allen (2014), Quaker Books, London, 4th revised edition.

*Silent Worship and Quaker Values: an introduction*, Marsha D Holliday, (2000), Friends General Conference, Philadelphia.

*This we can say: Australian Quaker life, faith and thought*, Australia Yearly Meeting (2003).

*Through us, not from us: vocal ministry and Quaker worship*, Rex Ambler, et.al. (2015), The Kindlers, London, UK.

*Where words come from: an interpretation of the ground and practice of Quaker worship and ministry*, Douglas V Steere (1985), Quaker Home Service: London, UK. New edition.

## PUBLISHED BY

Australia Yearly Meeting (2009)  
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia Inc.

**Inquiries:** QA Coordinator  
PO Box 6063  
O'Connor, ACT 2602  
<https://quakersaustralia.info>

