

Quaker Institutions and the Covenant Community

Note to the reader:

This was never meant to be a book. It still sort of isn't, though it is book-length. I originally wrote it as a series of cross-linked blog posts, in which you could start anywhere and click on specific parts of the text to read more about a particular idea. You can still read it that way on my website.

But some people like to read sequentially, preferring a print-out they can hold. This PDF is for that group of Friends. The essays are in a more-or-less logical order, but you don't necessarily have to start at the beginning and read to the end. You could jump around a bit.

No matter how you read these words, I hope they'll be useful to Friends who are asking questions about our Quaker communities, everything from local meetings to yearly meetings to various Quaker institutions. We've received a great deal from the generations who came before us. In these pages, you'll find my reflections on what we've inherited from our spiritual ancestors, including what I think is helpful and what I suspect isn't. You'll also find suggestions for experiments we might try. I'm a huge fan of experiments. Trying and failing is how we learn.

In Friendship,

Emily Provance
Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting
New York Yearly Meeting
and an associate of Good News Associates

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Institutions

On a Thursday, in a small-group ecumenical setting in Kentucky, I described a project I've been working on. My fellow group members were Baptists and Presbyterians. We had a little reflection time in which they asked me a lot of questions, a fair number of which had to do with Quakerism's denominational structures. Finally, a Baptist pastor said, "I think I understand the non-hierarchical approach, in terms of your theology. But for this particular project, why not form a new organization? What is this fear of institutions?"

I'm not afraid of institutions.

One of my favorite memories is a late-night gathering of a group of young adult Quakers in Peru. We came from six continents and every branch of Quakerism. (Actually, once we got together, we discovered that half the room had been taught in school that there are eight continents, of which Central America is one. This foreshadowed the diversity of our preconceived notions.)

We were trying to discern way forward about some particular question, and the actual question is irrelevant to my story. The problem—and also the opportunity—was that we had no common understanding of Quaker process nor any preexisting institutional structure. We all agreed on listening for God's leading, but that was our only common ground. We didn't have a clerk, nor did we agree what clerks should do. We didn't have a recording clerk, nor had everyone even heard of recording clerks—or, for that matter, minutes. There was no cultural crossover even on deciding whose turn it was to speak. In fact, we literally didn't share a common language, so various messages had to be relayed through multiple translators.

The power of God was palpable. And yet, it took us hours of worship and deep listening to find our way forward on the question at hand, even though the solution we eventually approved was actually a very minor step. I have a bone-deep sensory memory of the cold, the darkness outside, the rumbling tummies, the bright colors on the walls, the voices in multiple languages, the sleepiness of my drying eyes. I learned something that night about the power of faith.

And in the coming months, I was reminded of the power of institutions. Because we didn't have one, our hard-won minor step fell apart. There was no built-in clarity about who was supposed to do what as follow-up, so the combination of cultural differences and general reluctance to make assumptions meant that no one carried through. It was not a tragedy, nor anyone's fault. But it was evidence of a fundamental truth.

The best thing that institutions do is perpetuate existing patterns. The worst thing that institutions do is perpetuate existing patterns. I wonder sometimes if the Valiant Sixty would be dismayed at how many Quaker institutions now exist. At the same time, the Valiant Sixty never had to organize conferences, negotiate contracts, deal with nonprofit law, or make sure their staff had health insurance. They were part of a movement, a glorious one, but movements either burn out, or else they are assimilated into general society, or else they begin to form institutions. Because institutions perpetuate. Without them, we have to reinvent the same process every time.

I love institutions, and over time, I've learned to navigate our Quaker ones. I've learned how they can support and release our spiritual energy, and I've learned how they can drain it away. In the

coming essays, I'll be writing about our institutions—the theology behind them, the ways in which God uses them, the ways in which they hold us (and God's purposes) back, and some thoughts on how we might move forward.

Covenant Communities

Rejection of hierarchical positional spiritual authority is deeply embedded in Quaker DNA. George Fox told us that “Christ Jesus has come to teach His people for Himself.” It was part of a powerfully counter-cultural movement in which Friends declared no need for an intermediary between any human and God.

The implications of this were extraordinary...in England in the 1600s. The very concept that Anglican ministers were unnecessary, even an impediment to relationship with God, disturbed the social and moral and economic framework of the country. There is a reason early Friends so often found themselves in prison.

Fox wasn't the first person in that context to advocate for direct relationship with the Divine. Other small spiritual movements already existed, including Ranterism, in which adherents believed they needed no guidance but that which came directly from the Holy Spirit. The reason (I think) that Quakerism survived the next few centuries while Ranterism didn't is that we hit upon a *second* spiritual insight.

Turns out that when individuals all listen directly to Jesus, they hear different and sometimes conflicting messages. It's incredibly easy for heightened emotions, lack of experience, ego, and desire to get in the way of hearing from God, which can cause us to do things that are truly bizarre. (On the opposite end of the spectrum, it's incredibly easy for devotion to logic, feelings of certainty, habit, and exhaustion to get in the way of hearing from God, which can cause us to be stuck in lifeless patterns and indifference. But that is not the problem that early Friends had.)

The second spiritual insight of the early Friends was mutual accountability and corporate discernment. Yes, I can hear directly from God. But when I hear something that may seem a little out there, I test what I've heard with the rest of my community. We listen better collectively than separately.

One question this raises is how I'll react when my community comes to a different conclusion than I would individually. Do I stick with this group of people only when it tells me what I want to hear? Or am I prepared to trust and accept *no* for an answer? If I assume our relationship is going to be long-term, then I'm making a commitment to stick it out, even when things aren't going my way.

Early Friends formed local groups—what many of us call monthly meetings—for collective worship, corporate discernment, and mutual care. They were communities of the *convinced*, of people who'd had or were having a spiritual transformation. And because they were living in a society that was hostile to them (and, to be fair, to which they were hostile), they were very highly motivated to cling together.

In time, as Quakerism spread, we established more and more monthly meetings, and then we developed (I'm skipping very rapidly over some things) quarterly and yearly meetings. The local

community worshipped every week and held a meeting for business monthly. A little bit larger group—about as big as the distance you could travel in a day on a horse—gathered for worship and business quarterly. And a bigger area still gathered for worship and business annually.

Why didn't we just keep to our local monthly meetings? Because isolated groups, just like isolated individuals, will eventually drift apart culturally and theologically. If we only know the Friends in our local meeting and no one else, we will naturally start to lose our connection to the wider Religious Society of Friends. And we did believe ourselves to be a Society. We did believe there were things God would lead us to do. All of us. As a Society.

(Do we still believe there are things God will lead us to do? All of us? As a Society?)

We did not go to sleep one night with groups of people who worshipped together and wake up the following morning with interconnected institutions. The transition didn't happen that way. But we codified a few behaviors, named some functions, established some rules...years later, wrote some of these codifications down as Books of Discipline...years later, became legal entities...years later, some of us hired staff...

There's no question these days that our various meetings and umbrella organizations are institutions, with the possible exception of a few of our smallest local groups, some of which have no legal status or handbooks or property. And it's okay to be institutions. Institutions are important. They perpetuate patterns, and without them, we have to reinvent our processes every time. That takes way too much spiritual energy.

But our institutions get out of control when too many of us forget that they are also covenant communities. My quarterly meeting is not a thing *over there*. It is a group of people with whom I've entered a relationship of mutual care and accountability. My yearly meeting isn't *a nonprofit that does things*. It is a group of people with whom I've entered a relationship of mutual care and accountability. The umbrella organization isn't *an abstract distant establishment*. It is a group of people with whom I've entered a relationship of mutual care and accountability.

All of us who are connected with the Religious Society of Friends are in at least one, probably several, of these covenant relationships. That is part of the definition of being a Quaker. And we can forget, or decline to remember, these relationships in a couple of ways. Those of us who are less involved in one institution or another might say, *that other group has nothing to do with me*. Those of us who are deeply involved and emotionally invested might say, *those other people clearly don't know or care what we're doing on their behalf*.

I'm not, here, implying that everybody must be involved in everything, nor trying to make any of us feel guilty. But when our institutions fail to support God's purposes, it is often because we've stopped treating them as though they are covenant communities. It can help us a lot to dig down to our theological roots: Christ Jesus has come to teach His people for Himself, and we listen better together than separately.

Recording vs Nominating

“Rejection of hierarchical positional spiritual authority is deeply embedded in Quaker DNA.” That was the first sentence of the essay before this one, and there’s a reason the statement has so many adjectives.

Let’s try it some other ways.

“Rejection of **hierarchical positional spiritual authority** is deeply embedded in Quaker DNA.” No. While lots of Quakers aren’t fans of hierarchical positional authority, we don’t have a corporate testimony against it. We function all the time in secular companies and organizations that are hierarchical. We understand the concept of bosses and employees. We’re even prepared, in many cases, to have hierarchical staffs within Quaker organizations, in which one staff member manages other staff members. Our problem is specifically with deriving spiritual authority from hierarchical positions. We believe spiritual authority comes from God, not as a result of any earthly decision or education or ceremony. It’s why we don’t have bishops or cardinals.

“Rejection of **hierarchical positional spiritual authority** is deeply embedded in Quaker DNA.” Sort of. I’d argue you can have belief in a hierarchical spiritual authority without that authority being reliant on a position. For example, you might claim that older people have more spiritual authority than younger people or that North American and European people have more spiritual authority than African and South American people. While those types of hierarchical beliefs are officially in conflict with our theology—we do say that God might speak through anyone—we have not always *acted* as though this particular truth were true. We still mess this up. So I’m not sure it’s deeply embedded in our DNA.

“Rejection of **hierarchical positional spiritual authority** is deeply embedded in Quaker DNA.” No. Emphatically no. And this is the statement I’m focusing on today.

Actually, traditional Quakerism *emphasized* **positional spiritual authority**, and I would argue that there are still traces of this in our theology, but for various reasons, we don’t fully practice it in modern day. I’m talking about positional spiritual authority as it manifests in recorded ministers, elders, and overseers, as well as in Quaker pastors.

It’s a very fine line, the difference between the positional spiritual authority of a Friend with a recorded role and the hierarchical positional spiritual authority that comes with ordained clergy in many faith traditions. But there is a theological difference.

My understanding is that in most other Christian denominations, the act of ordination in itself conveys spiritual power. It’s not done willy-nilly these days. Most churches ask clergy to go through lots of discernment and education and preparation. Unlike what often happened in the 1600s, when the church might have been seen as a career path for third sons of noble families, both Protestantism and Catholicism expect their modern clergy to experience a genuine calling. But still, there is a moment before ordination when the person does not have spiritual authority and then a moment afterward when they have more spiritual authority or power than other people do. The ceremony itself initiates a cause-and-effect, hierarchical change.

Not so in Quaker theology. The recording of an overseer, elder, or minister, including the recording of a minister who is specifically a pastor, is simply the community recognizing something that

God has already made true. For example, the recorded elder already *is* an elder before the recording. We're just writing it down. And these are not hierarchical roles.

But if not hierarchical, what were or what are they?

Let's start with overseers. First, I recognize that the word *overseer* has historical associations with slavery and that it's a word we generally do not use in Quakerism—for good reason—today. I use it here only because its original Quaker meaning is an important concept, and the word does not have a synonym in the English language. An overseer was a person whom God had called to care for the physical and temporal needs of God's community. Overseers were responsible for ensuring that all Friends in the Meeting were fed and housed. They visited the sick and the imprisoned. They checked to be sure that all our children were educated. Early Quakers didn't exactly live in an economically communal, sharing-everything kind of system, but those who needed financial help received it. Overseers watched over that process and sometimes also cared for the Meeting's property, such as meetinghouse buildings.

An elder was a person (of any age) whom God had called to care for the spiritual needs of God's community. At their best, elders prayed with individual members, recognized and nurtured their spiritual gifts, encouraged them, comforted them, challenged them, and possibly healed them. Elders watched over meeting for worship and, when necessary, intervened if something had gone spiritually awry. They also enforced Spirit-led community norms, and doing this too strictly and with too little mercy is what eventually led to elders being viewed as dictatorial. But they were never intended to be.

A minister was a person whom God had called to preach and/or teach. In the earliest days of Quakerism, most ministers were evangelists. A bit later, the majority were traveling ministers, who sometimes evangelized but most often visited established Quaker communities. In addition to their Spirit-led speaking in meetings for worship, ministers prayed with individual families and helped to recognize and nurture young ministers. And over meals and in front of firesides, they served as a circulatory system, bringing news and inspiration from one Meeting to another.

Friends' pastors, who were not named as such in our systems in early Quakerism but began to be integrated in some branches in the 1800s, were (and are) recorded in keeping with similar theology. Among Friends, a pastor is often charged to preach, teach, and provide spiritual accompaniment and visitation. They are not ordained. They are *recorded*—that is, officially recognized by the group as serving the community in the role that God has already given them.

I started this section by saying that Friends traditionally did *not* reject positional spiritual authority. And we didn't. It's just that we recognized it can only come from God. Our ministers, elders, overseers, and pastors each have or had spiritual authority of whatever particular kind we knew God had given them, and recording was about being sure we were all clear on this.

Human beings, fallible as we are, probably never did all this perfectly. But the recording system functioned fairly well for a good long while. Eventually, our systems of mutual accountability kind of fell apart. Elders (generalizing, as a group) became dictatorial. Ministers (generalizing, as a group) became loose cannons who fought among themselves. I'm honestly not sure what happened to overseers. But in the United States, we went through a hundred-year period of divisiveness, splitting,

and reunification. In the process, we lost a huge number of members, and when we came back together, we mostly stopped recording.

It was the 1960s, rebellion in the air, equality at the forefront of minds. Furthermore, Friends had just been through a multi-generational, trust-shattering spiritual crisis. And for all these reasons, or maybe none of them, we started to change the way we do things. For the most part, instead of naming and recording, we started nominating Friends to committees.

There is a huge difference between being recorded and being nominated to a committee. When a Friend is recorded, the message given is, “We recognize that *this is the person God has made you to be.*” When a Friend is nominated, the message given is, “We are asking you *to do this particular set of tasks for the next few years.*” It was an enormous shift in our institutions. I’m not sure whether anyone recognized that at the time.

Furthermore, I wonder how the change relates to our theology. What happened to people being made, each differently, like in 1 Corinthians 12, to function in covenant communities? Do we still believe that? If we do, how is that reflected in our committee structure, where a person might be asked to do pastoral care for six years, then budgets for three, then property for six, then religious education for two, and then back to pastoral care? Is this, as some have told me, a manifestation of greater certainty about the testimony of equality? Or is it us being afraid to recognize and honor the God-made differences between us, for fear we won’t be able to do that faithfully? We have reason to be afraid. We’ve messed it up before.

One more question—what does our committee structure do in terms of spiritual authority? We used to recognize spiritual authority positionally. Not *hierarchical* positional spiritual authority. But the knowledge that an elder could be trusted in spiritual matters related to being an elder. And an overseer could be trusted in spiritual matters related to being an overseer. And a minister could be trusted in spiritual matters related to being a minister.

Do we believe, now, in our institutions, that committee members have spiritual authority? If so, then it follows by historical theology that the budget committee member must have been given budget-related spiritual authority *before* we placed them on the budget committee, and approving their nomination was a recognition of that spiritual authority. Is that how we think of it? I don’t.

Does that mean, then, that we’ve decided there is no such thing as spiritual authority? What would that imply about trust, about the charges we give to committees, about spiritual giftedness, about covenant community generally?

I should clarify that I’m not attempting to strike down all committees. I’m just wondering whether we made a massive change without working through its theological implications. And while continuing revelation is a crucial part of Quakerism, I don’t think that *forgetting* what we used to believe is what continuing revelation means. If we suspect our theology has changed, then we need to grapple with that.

But I still think God calls individual Friends to specific purposes. I still believe in leadings. And where in our institutional structures do we have space to recognize these?

The Calcification of Committees

The best thing that institutions do is perpetuate patterns. The worst thing that institutions do is perpetuate patterns.

Suppose that a Friend—let’s call her Prudence—develops a concern for the health and welfare of zebras. This is a genuine, Spirit-led concern. She feels led to make an ongoing study of zebras, to raise money for their preservation, and to lobby governmental officials on their behalf. Prudence brings the concern to her meeting. Her authentically inspired words touch many Friends in the meeting quite deeply. Soon, it’s clear that several Friends share Prudence’s concern for zebras.

The meeting approves a minute establishing a Zebra Committee under the care of the monthly meeting. The Zebra Committee is charged with (1) studying the health and welfare of zebras; (2) raising money for the preservation of zebras and donating these funds to appropriate organizations; (3) lobbying government officials on issues related to the welfare of zebras, and (4) making a report on the committee’s progress to the business meeting twice a year.

Within three months, six Friends are serving on the Zebra Committee, having been duly appointed by nominating. Prudence is clerk. For the first three years of the committee’s existence, all is well. The Friends are able to raise quite a lot of money, and they “adopt” two zebras through the International Zebra Fund, at a cost of \$120 per month. They report their progress to the meeting twice a year. The meeting is pleased, and Prudence and other Friends have been faithful.

In the fourth year, however, the clerk of the meeting steps down, and a new clerk is appointed. This new clerk has only recently transferred his membership to the meeting. He has not read the entire handbook and therefore doesn’t realize that the Zebra Committee, unlike other committees, is charged to report to the business meeting every six months. A full year goes by before it occurs to anyone that the Zebra Committee hasn’t reported in a while. Someone mentions this to the clerk, but the conversation happens at social hour over a particularly good cake, and three more people mention three other things to the clerk before he finishes eating, so he forgets.

Prudence and the rest of the committee, meanwhile, are getting on with the good work of advocacy on behalf of zebras. When they send a letter to a local politician, they hear back that the politician is already working quite hard on preservation of both zebras and wildebeests. This strikes a chord with committee members because they already know that the two species are reliant upon one another in several ways in the wild. Although the committee’s fundraising has gone less well in the past year than it had previously, there is a small pool of unspent money. The committee decides to “adopt” a wildebeest in addition to its two zebras. The monthly costs for animal support now total \$170.

Three more years go by. The meeting has not heard any reports from the zebra committee, and by this point, no one remembers that they were ever supposed to. Prudence has occasionally put a brief update about the zebra committee’s work in the newsletter, but very few Friends actually read the newsletter in full, so the meeting’s general awareness of zebra-related concerns is quite low, and most Friends have no idea that the committee is also working to support wildebeests. Four of the original six members have left the committee, but nominating has only found one new member, so they’re down to

three Friends. Most people are not led to join the zebra committee partly because they have no experiential knowledge of what the committee is doing or why.

Two more years pass. It has now been nine years since Prudence's original leading and report to business meeting. Prudence's health is deteriorating as she ages. She is no longer able to clerk the zebra committee nor to do active fundraising on its behalf. But the Spirit-led concern for zebras and wildebeests is still very much on her heart. The meeting as a whole can no longer honestly say that it has a corporate leading to work for the preservation of zebras. But they do love Prudence, and the concern is very important to Prudence, so no one is willing to lay down the committee.

The \$170/month in donations adds up quickly, and with no one actively fundraising for the concern anymore, the \$2040/year winds up coming out of the meeting's general budget. Because the meeting is having difficulty covering its financial obligations overall, a new attender suggests cutting the amount in half. This is approved. Prudence, who is no longer able to attend business meeting because of mobility and transportation concerns, is deeply hurt when she reads the minutes.

The story could go on. There are decades-old "zebra committees" in many, many Quaker institutions. And in some cases, the situation gets far worse than the imaginary scenario I detailed above.

The thing I want to point out about this story is that Prudence had a genuine, God-given concern for zebras. And the meeting, when it first heard her speak, felt this and recognized it and had a genuine, God-given leading to support Prudence's concern. Whatever problems came later weren't a result of anyone's lack of faithfulness. They were a result of Friends who thought the only possible institutional response was a committee.

Let's rewind to the day that Prudence brought her concern to business meeting. What other responses were available to Friends?

Maybe what was needed was a Zebra Working Group. Working groups are clustered around a specific concern rather than a specific task or set of tasks. They may or may not have a formal charge. They almost certainly wouldn't have a handbook page. Working groups are composed of people who volunteer because they share a common concern. They figure out, together, how they're led to respond to that concern, and when they need approval for a proposal, they bring it back to whomever formed them—in this case, the monthly meeting. Working groups can lay themselves down when they feel finished, or they can be laid down by the group that formed them if interest seems to have waned.

Or maybe the meeting should have set up a Zebra Concern Task Group. That's an appropriate reaction if the meeting needs a specific short-term job done, including research into possible next steps. They could have written a minute asking Prudence and two other Friends to learn more about zebra conservation and bring suggestions for action to the meeting. A task group is automatically laid down when it finishes its defined task, so there's rarely a problem of the structure sticking around after it no longer has life.

Or maybe Prudence just needed permission to take on a volunteer role. It's absolutely possible that Prudence only needed the meeting to affirm her concern and ask her to keep them up to date. They could have suggested she use a small bulletin board in the lobby to create a display, or add zebra-related books to their library, or pose zebra conservation announcements in the meeting's social media group, or

offer an intergenerational forum about zebras one Sunday afternoon. Not every concern we have requires a formal, institution-oriented response.

Or maybe Prudence was being led into ministry. Maybe, had the meeting thought to offer Prudence a clearness committee, they would have discovered that she had a genuine leading to travel among Friends (or among people in general) speaking and teaching about the health and welfare of zebras. Perhaps the world had need of a Spirit-led zebra advocate and God had been nudging Prudence in that direction, but the meeting had no experience in recognizing that kind of call.

Committees are not a fundamentally bad approach. They're exactly the right approach for certain kinds of circumstances. Committees are the most rigidly structured form of organization available to Friends...an exact number of members, a nominating process and approval, a written charge, regular reports, the assumption that they'll continue in perpetuity. What committees do best is the same thing over and over. They're perfect for easily defined (not necessarily easy) bodies of work that need to be done repeatedly or continuously. But they don't work well for concerns that are immediate or that require creative, agile responses. And they're not very helpful when we're not sure how to define the scope of work.

The last thing I want is for anybody to codify in their handbooks the exact differences between committees and working groups and task groups and volunteer roles and ministries and then sketch a discernment flow chart that must be followed precisely. But ideally, somebody in Prudence's meeting would have been comfortable enough offering alternatives to say, "Gee willikers, this sounds like a job for a working group!" Or something like that.

The alternative, which is consistently forming committees, means consistently choosing the least flexible, most permanent response available to us. It also means, as I talked about in my last essay, that we're defaulting to not recognizing that sometimes a concern is the start of a call to ministry. The theoretical purpose of our institutions is to support our ability to discern and respond to revelation, and getting caught up in rigid structures actively undermines that.

Yearly Meetings and Traveling Ministry

In the 21st century, how do yearly meetings practice corporate discernment?

In most cases, new pieces of business rise from yearly meeting committees, though they can come from monthly or regional meetings. The question at hand is first explained in some kind of written form, in a document that's sent by email to the Friends who have registered for the yearly meeting gathering. Monthly meetings can also access these documents ahead of yearly meeting, theoretically, and consider them in worship, but most don't—perhaps because they don't have time, perhaps because the pieces of business aren't thoroughly explained, or perhaps because the proposals don't feel relevant.

When the yearly meeting gathering happens, Friends in attendance—often fewer than 2% of the number of members of the yearly meeting—hear an ultra-refined version of the proposal at hand. Some committee or group of people has worked hard to develop a presentation that will be as clear as possible

while not taking up too much time on the agenda. The body then has a few minutes—ten, maybe twenty, an hour for something really big—to consider the matter in worship.

The Friends gathered (again, often fewer than 2% of the number of members of the yearly meeting) discern way forward as faithfully as they're able, given limited time and numbers and information. A minute is written. Friends in local meetings who were not present at yearly meeting gathering may or may not eventually hear about whatever the decision was. When they do, they may or may not feel it has anything to do with them.

Generally speaking, every person in the system I've outlined above is doing the absolute best they can, and generally they all have honorable intentions. There are, however, several fundamental flaws within the system—things that don't function well organizationally and/or aren't consistent with Quaker theology. I'm going to point out a few. Perhaps you'll think of more.

First—new items of business often arise from yearly meeting committees. There's nothing really wrong with that if the committee is making a proposal that's consistent with the work they've specifically been charged to do and if that charge is consistent with the discernment of the whole yearly meeting. But often, one or both of those things is not the case, which means that the yearly meeting is suddenly considering a proposal that's coming from a very small group of Friends and hasn't had any yearly-meeting-wide discernment before appearing on the agenda.

Second—the question at hand is explained in written form ahead of time, in some form of advance documents, and this is often the first and only time that most Friends will hear about it before beginning corporate discernment at the yearly meeting gathering. We talk about items of business as having been “seasoned” by the committee that presents it, and what we usually mean by that is that the idea has been questioned and developed and prayed over and refined. Which is good. But there's something I'm wondering about seasoning. It seems to me as though the process of seasoning a proposal actually has two purposes. One is to prepare the proposal. The other is to prepare our hearts and minds to accept it. When we're called to some new thing by God, those of us who aren't part of the seasoning process often struggle to accept the idea. Because we have missed the formative process. Even if the proposal may be perfect, we have not been given the benefit of the journey to that perfection, and therefore, we're not in a place to approve it.

Third—monthly meetings often don't consider matters of business before the yearly meeting sessions. If those Friends who attend yearly meeting are supposed to be discerning on behalf of the whole yearly meeting body, surely those Friends who are present should have some sense of how the non-present 98% of the body is feeling about the particular matter at hand, even if they are not intended to function as literal representatives of their monthly meetings. But they often have no idea what other Friends feel. So they're not really doing discernment that takes into consideration the wisdom and leadings of the whole yearly meeting. They're doing discernment that represents the 2%...not because they're unfaithful but because that's all they have access to.

Fourth—the time available on the yearly meeting agenda is so limited that Friends hear only a brief overview of the proposals, then have limited time to hold those proposals in worship. We Friends say that things happen in God's time, not our time, and God's time is not necessarily slow. Nor is God's

time always containable in a period of twenty minutes. Moreover, there's a natural tendency toward anxiety and conflict because there are a few Friends who have had much longer than twenty minutes to hold the proposal in worship...namely, the Friends who are making the proposal. For them, the moment in business meeting is often the culmination of months or years of labor. It is almost impossible for a group that has been through that amount of work and discernment to have patience for a larger group that's doing the best it can but is, ultimately, still in a very early stage of the discernment process, working through initial emotional reactions and very basic logistical questions. We also all know that either the thing must be approved today or it must wait for months or even a full year until the next opportunity. No matter how spiritually mature and centered we might be, that's a lot of pressure.

Fifth—the minute that is eventually approved and sent to monthly meetings feels distant to Friends who weren't present at the yearly meeting gathering. These Friends haven't just had limited time to discern. They haven't had any time at all. And yet, this minute is said to represent the yearly meeting's discernment. Is it any wonder that Friends who aren't active in their yearly meeting gatherings and committee structures often feel that yearly meetings are some other thing unrelated to them? But we know that's not meant to be the case. The yearly meeting is meant to be a covenant community engaged in corporate discernment and mutual care.

On the whole, I really question our 21st century institutional systems and whether our yearly meetings, as currently designed, have any ability to fulfill their purpose, which is to support the entire yearly meeting's corporate discernment and to provide an institutional structure that can implement that discernment after it's done.

But people don't design flawed systems on purpose. We do things the way we do them for a reason. I have some guesses about how we got where we are.

Why do new items of business often arise from yearly meeting committees? Because the Friends on these committees have a legitimate spiritual leading to do work among Friends in a broader setting than their local meetings. And yearly meeting committee service is the most obvious way to do that.

Why are new items of business distributed in written form, pre-seasoned by committees? Because we know there isn't time to start from scratch when the yearly meeting gathering happens, and this is the most obvious method available to get a head start on the discernment and save time.

Why do monthly meetings usually not consider items of business before yearly meeting gatherings? Because there's no sensible reason to do so. Friends in local meetings are smart enough to know that if a local meeting does do such discernment, there is no pathway built into our systems by which their discernment can make any difference to the ultimate decision. A monthly meeting might write a minute of support or objection. Or a Friend from that monthly meeting might attend yearly meeting and express that support or objection in worship. But ultimately, this carries very little weight. Officially, it carries no weight at all. Because Friends' discernment is done by those who are physically (or virtually) in the room at the time the proposal is presented. We can't design the process otherwise because, if we do, Friends who are not in the room can hold us back from moving forward. That would be wrong because we know that new spiritual understanding often happens in the actual process of sitting in worship together.

Why is the time on the yearly meeting agenda so limited? Because we have so many items of business to get through and so few days to be together. Almost all work done by yearly meetings is done by committees (who need approval for significant actions) or by staff (who are given specific and limited scopes of authority). Each major action must be discerned on the floor of the yearly meeting gathering to move forward.

And why are minutes simply sent to local meetings afterward? Because by that stage in the process, there's nothing else we can do.

The system by which yearly meetings function today simply doesn't work very well. It is slow and often tedious and tends to represent the discernment of a relatively small number of self-selected people.

What's the alternative? I can think of two, and I hope we'll try both.

When there's work that we know needs to be done, and when we're all pretty clear on what that work is, it makes a lot of sense to employ staff. Yearly meetings that have enough resources already do. Staff, when ethically treated by the yearly meeting and hired for positions to which they are well suited, are an excellent solution to running the website, or cutting checks, or providing emergency support to local meetings, or writing the newsletter, or organizing gatherings, or any one of a number of clear, specific, and necessary functions.

But the other piece we're missing is recognizing ministry.

Why do new items of business often arise from yearly meeting committees? Because the Friends on these committees have a legitimate spiritual leading to do work among Friends in a broader setting than their local meetings. And yearly meeting committee service is the most obvious way to do that.

But it's not the only way. Because we could recognize ministry.

Ever since our historical period of divisions and reunifications, we have struggled with issues of trust and ministry. Committees are safer. We know what committees are going to do. We know that we have control over who serves on them. We know that if they want to take a major step, they'll have to come back for our approval. We know that they're likely to meet once a month and write reports and, in general, take steps that are relatively small and predictable. Because those are the steps that they can get approved.

Because committee service is our default form of work, most Friends called to work beyond their local meetings will join yearly meeting committees. But that's not how we used to do it. It used to be that a Friend experiencing that call would bring the leading to their monthly meeting. They would ask for a travel minute. Friends would say "yes" or "no" or sometimes "wait." That third option generally meant that the person wasn't yet fully clear about their call or that we sensed they needed to learn more first. And usually, given a little time and spiritual discipline, that "wait" would become a "yes."

The practice of ministry carries with it all kinds of implications. We have to have the spiritual strength and willingness to tell each other yes and no. We have to be willing to support ministry, to name and cultivate elders who are capable of nurturing ministry (even if we don't record those elders), and to trust the ministers and hold them accountable. All of that is potentially quite scary, and yes, there's room for things to go wrong.

But if we did it, how would yearly meetings function differently?

New items of business on yearly meeting agendas would never appear to come from nowhere. They'd come from monthly meetings, who'd be considering the matters in worship on a regular basis because they'd be sending and receiving traveling ministers. Those traveling ministers would be carrying concerns from one meeting to another. This travel could happen physically or virtually. Conversations would happen about new movements of Spirit over coffee, on walks, in cars, and in front of fireplaces. The ideas would be seasoned one meeting at a time, in the natural process of travel, and we ourselves would be seasoned by those ideas as that happened.

When a proposal was ready to come to the floor of the yearly meeting, having already been in business meetings in at least a few different monthly meetings and regional meetings, almost no one would be present who hadn't already encountered the new idea. We would not be starting with the first twenty minutes of discernment. There'd be many conversations and periods of worship already in place. We'd know how Friends generally, across the yearly meeting, were feeling led. We'd be able to engage deeply, fully prepared.

The agenda would also be shorter. We would have given most of the routine work to staff and then trusted those staff members to do the work they'd been given. And our ministers would be trusted to do the work they were called to do, held accountable by their local meetings and/or support committees, probably reporting to us but not needing permission from the whole yearly meeting for each new step. Because we've discerned already that they are following a genuine call faithfully, and therefore, we trust the work they're doing.

And when Friends in local meetings received minutes afterward, those Friends would recognize the decisions made at yearly meeting as the Spirit-led result of a long discernment process in which they themselves had been involved.

How do we get to this? By dismantling the assumption that the default response to a spiritual call is to make or join a committee. This wouldn't be easy. Most monthly meetings have not recognized and supported a call to ministry in living memory. It is really, really hard to know how to do it—intellectually, but also spiritually and emotionally. It requires mutual trust and a willingness to hold each other accountable. Sometimes it requires financial support. These are areas that aren't comfortable for many of us. We will make mistakes.

I still believe it's an experiment worth trying. Most of us never laid down the concept of traveling ministry. We just stopped doing it. We can try again. Was it a perfect system? Heck, no, it wasn't. But neither is the system that we're trying to make work today.

What Has Life

Does this have Life?

Not long ago, I sat around a table with a Baptist, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian, and a Disciple. This is not the beginning of a joke. They were talking about theologies of communion. Does the bread have to be blessed? Can it be crackers? How about potato chips? How important is dipping versus

sipping versus gulping? Grape juice or wine? Wafer or Wonder Bread? It was a cheerful conversation with lots of laughter, more congenial and sympathetic than it was a debate. There was a moment of silence when somebody mentioned the Catholics...not because anybody objected to Catholics but because they felt sorry for them. Catholics went many months without communion during the pandemic because their theology absolutely requires the bread to be blessed in person by a priest, and a lot of Catholics deeply grieved this.

Finally, the question was raised. “How do Quakers do communion?”

It always takes me a second to respond to this question, not because I don’t know the answer but because I feel like I have to answer twice. Most Quakers would say that we don’t do communion. But that wasn’t actually our original theology. Instead, we used to say that our communion is spiritual, that it happens in the act of expectant worship when we, together, consume the presence of God.

I’m not 100% sure whether early Friends would have called physical communion evil or just unnecessary. But the objection, as I understand it, was primarily about empty forms. If an action wasn’t done with the power of Christ, with the direct prompting of the Holy Spirit, then it became an empty form and, thus, not of God.

Early Friends thought most parts of established religions were empty forms, which doesn’t feel fair to me. Many people, for example, still derive enormous spiritual meaning from taking physical communion. But the idea of not doing it if it doesn’t have Life...that does resonate with me.

I’ve heard of some Friends who took this to an extreme. They wouldn’t, for example, pray or read the Bible unless they felt directly prompted by God to do so. And I think we have to strike a balance. It would be a problem if we said that no one would pay the meetinghouse’s water bill unless they felt a prompting from the Holy Spirit, because honestly I think God doesn’t micromanage toilets.

Still, it’s a useful question: does this task have Life?

As I’ve said before, there are almost no situations in which we Friends do things without an historical reason. But because institutions perpetuate patterns, it’s often very hard to make ourselves stop doing something, even if the historical reason is obsolete. In other words, we have forms without Life.

I’m the farthest thing there is from a botanist, but even I know that sometimes plants are pruned because their nourishment and energy are stretched too thin. If the lifeless pieces aren’t cut away, the entire plant can die. So, too, can Quaker communities die because we’re drained by empty forms. Keeping things going takes spiritual energy, to say nothing of the physical and mental and financial.

Giving energy to that which does *not* have Life can come at the cost of what *does* have Life. We can fail to respond to the Holy Spirit because we’re busy maintaining what God needed us to do three generations ago. Which can lead to enormous frustration, especially for Friends who are feeling inspired. Their inspiration is often squashed because the community has no energy to spare.

I’ve run into a few Friends whose reaction to this is not “we should prune” but “we should cut down the whole tree”—which is a perspective I can sympathize with, but we do need some kind of institutions.

Does this have Life? If not, can we skip it? Sometimes the answer is no, we can’t—but I think it’s question worth asking more often.

Does this have Life? If it does, can we nourish it? We could say yes a lot more often if we cut out some of our empty forms. And I strongly suspect our Quaker ancestors would approve.

Why We Have Worth

I spend a lot of time thinking about Quaker institutions from 20,000 feet. The wide perspective comes naturally to me. But when we get right down to it, there's no such thing as an abstract Quaker institution. And for many reasons of messy humanness, it's not easy for real-life people to make theoretically sensible changes.

One of the reasons that change is hard is the desperate human need to have worth. This is a rough one because, of course, we all have infinite inviolable worth. As Quakers, we know this. We say it to each other. And yet ...

Many of us find this hard to believe. Or if we believe we have abstract worth, we might still feel insecure about our value in the context of community. I first learned about this in a workshop on aging. We talked about the fact that many people, as a matter of natural progression, begin to lose certain abilities as they age. Perhaps there's a reduction in cognitive capacity; perhaps there's a general decrease in energy. If the people in their community have only ever complimented this person on their work—you're a great notetaker, I love the soup you make, thanks for setting up the benches today—then that person has a reason to believe they'll be loved less by their community when they become less able to do things.

There's nothing wrong with complimenting people's work or thanking them for the service they give. But it's important that we also show we value people's *beings*—I appreciate your kindness, hearing you laugh makes me happy, you are my friend, I love you. It can be easy to skip over that bit. Expressing those feelings might be less comfortable, or maybe we assume people already know. The truth is, it often isn't clear.

Think about your own connection with various communities. What is it that you know people value about your presence there? You, as an individual?

In the context of Quaker institutions, people's sense of worth can function almost like teeny-tiny landmines. A meeting that owns an old building might need to sell it—but that will be hard if George is deriving a sense of his value from being the only one who knows how to fix the furnace. It might be time to shut down the monthly regional potluck, especially if the energy we're spending on it is preventing the group from being able to explore new ministries—but Margaret will find that impossible to imagine, because she's been making the apple pie every month for forty-five years, as did her mother before her.

Neither George nor Margaret is to be blamed. Nearly all of us do this sort of thing, and sometimes we don't even realize we're doing it. A George or a Margaret might throw up enormous resistance to a proposal for change without explicitly identifying this sense of worth as a problem. It's up to the rest of us to pay attention and walk alongside them until we understand what's happening.

It will take time and tact and deep listening and Spirit-led presence to help George and Margaret understand that we love them and that our love is not conditional upon particular functions. They also need to know that our new configuration, whatever that might be, will have a place for them. This is part of what it means to be covenant community.

It's worth noting, however, that loving Margaret and George does not mean permitting them to prevent the rest of us from making a needed change, once we know what that change must be. The tyranny of one is not corporate discernment, and it's also not how we show healthy love.

Trust

How do you decide who to trust? If you're like me, that's not a simple question. I can think of many times, looking back, when I've trusted someone too easily. Sometimes I've relied on someone to do something, and they haven't come through. Sometimes I've assumed someone knew what they were talking about, and they didn't. Occasionally I've trusted someone who literally turned out to be dangerous to me. Everyone's had at least a few trusted-too-much experiences.

But we can't trust nobody. Not if we're going to live in community. A certain degree of trust is required just to cross the street. We have to believe that strangers will stop at red lights.

The concept of covenant community requires a very high degree of trust indeed. Which is not to say that God would ask us to trust every Quaker immediately and entirely. Abuse can and does happen in Quaker communities. And even when it doesn't, there are many other ways to violate trust.

So we need some way to know who is trustworthy and to what degree. It's vital, especially because we're meant to be nurturing one another spiritually, and that requires legitimate vulnerability.

One way to go about this is simply knowing each other for a long time. We have small interactions. We trust each other with little things. That works out well, we try again. We pay attention to people's reputations. We get a sense of one another. This isn't a perfect system, but it's one we practice our whole lives long, and it tends to work the majority of the time.

The trouble is, in large local meetings, or when we get to things like regional and yearly meetings, we simply can't know everybody. So how do we know who is trustworthy?

As far as I can tell, the first time Quakers asked this question was back in the age of Second Day Meeting. This was pretty early Quakerism, when it used to be possible for most or all of the traveling ministers in England to gather on Mondays and discuss what had happened in worship the day before. These ministers reflected informally on the state of the Society and made decisions about who would go where for the next week.

After a while, though, some rather odd people started to show up for Second Day Meeting. Maybe they didn't really know much about Quakerism, or maybe they weren't very spiritually centered, or maybe they were outright disruptive, or maybe they seemed to have a shadowy agenda of some kind. Since the traveling ministers didn't all know each other, and since new traveling ministers were feeling called all the time, they couldn't just identify who belonged on sight. So these Friends instituted a rule

that each attender at Second Day Meeting had to have something in writing from their own home worship community saying, essentially, “This person’s legit.”

This was the origin of recording.

Later on, when Quakers were more spread out, the ministers couldn’t all gather for Second Day Meeting. For a while, there were tons of traveling ministers, and they were going all over the world. Each carried with them a travel minute, a letter from their home meeting saying that the work they were doing was of God. These letters were the way in which receiving communities knew to trust them. The letter was proof that the Friend had been through a process of corporate discernment, and they hadn’t just gone off on a whim. And these travel minutes were endorsed by each community visited. In other words, people wrote back to the home meeting, letting them know if everything went all right. It was extra layer of evidence that this Friend should be trusted to travel again.

There came a point, though—we are fast forwarding through more than a hundred years of history and crossing the Atlantic Ocean here—when traveling ministers began to differ from one another in significant theological ways. The messages they carried often conflicted directly. This was the seed of the Orthodox-Hicksite division. And after the division happened, Orthodox Friends trusted Orthodox Friends and Hicksite Friends trusted Hicksite Friends. Your travel minute and recording were irrelevant if they’d been issued by “those other Quakers.”

The crack in our Society runs deep. My own yearly meeting, New York, reunited in the 1950s, and there are still Friends alive who remember that (barely). Once, in a small all-age group of Friends, I was leading a game that involved two small stuffed animals. Since we were a reunified yearly meeting, I named the two critters Hicks and Hoag—after Elias Hicks (famous Hicksite minister, now stuffed tiger) and Joseph Hoag (famous Orthodox minister, now stuffed lion). Most of us thought this was fun. But one older man gave the tiger a new name before he would touch it. He didn’t like the Hicksites. Not even in play.

Reunification wasn’t easy. I’ve read the minutes. They make me cry. There’s a beauty in their coming back together, but it wasn’t immediate and total healing. There were a lot of things that Friends then just didn’t talk about. If they did, they quarreled. So they stayed silent. And they formed committees.

Committees modulate the degree of trust necessary. We approve or disapprove of nominations. The nominations happen for a limited time. Big steps still have to be approved by the whole body. We know that committees can’t do anything radical. So we don’t have to worry very much about trusting.

I think that’s one way we manage trust nowadays. The other way we seem to do it is by saying, “I trust you because you are like me.” Most Quaker communities I visit, including my own, have certain key words or phrases they seem to look for. Using them functions as a shibboleth. Some are theological. Some are cultural. Some are sociological. Some are literally familial, in the sense of, “Oh, I knew your grandpa.”

Other words and phrases are essentially forbidden. If used, they communicate, “I am *other*. Not to be trusted.” And yes, we have phrases that are shibboleth in one place and forbidden in another. As a

traveling minister, I've learned to be conscious of these. I never lie, but I adapt my speech depending on where I am because experience has shown me that not doing so can snap budding relationships.

I have a travel minute from my meeting. I'm extremely grateful for it. It's evidence of corporate discernment of a ministry, and I needed that for my own sake if no one else's, especially in the earliest days. But travel minutes are no longer universally accepted evidence of trustworthiness among Friends in the 21st century. Today, trustworthiness comes from reputation. Speaking. Writing. Interacting. Facilitating. It involves a lot of branding and marketing principles. I hated all that for a very long time because it felt dishearteningly worldly.

I complained about this once to a Quaker minister with many more decades of experience than I have, and he smiled sort of gently and said, "Thee must demonstrate thy faithfulness over time." It stopped me in my tracks. Because *of course that's right*.

I'm not sure that Quakers have ever had a magical solution to the trust problem. Maybe we invented travel minutes because we were living in an era of letters of introduction, and writing a letter for someone to carry with them was the culturally normal way to establish trust. These days, it seems like it's done with a blog. And social media networks. And personal contacts. Which is the 21st century's culturally normal way. I trust you because I've gotten to know you...if not in person, then by reading your website.

In all of this, I have four main points.

#1: All institutions have to solve the problem of "how do we know who to trust?" A common solution is hierarchy, but we have rejected that. Still, Quaker institutions have solved this trust problem multiple times. Each time, they've done it in a manner appropriate for their historical era.

#2: Some of our historical models, such as travel minutes and recording, don't have the trustworthiness effect that they used to, even though these processes haven't been laid down officially in most places. Why? Perhaps the practices are less well known. Or perhaps they're less appropriate in the modern era. I have a suspicion that it also has something to do with our current manner of practicing corporate discernment, but I'll say more about that in another essay.

#3: One solution for the trustworthiness question is committees. But in my opinion, this is less about trusting people and more about a structure in which people don't need to be trusted as much. And a side effect is slowing, sometimes preventing, powerful ministry.

#4: We don't have strong methods in place to decide who's trustworthy across yearly meetings. For instance, a Friend's service on a committee in California doesn't mean much to a Friend in Uganda. So instead, we use theological and cultural commonalities to judge trustworthiness. This plays into an us/them dynamic that is threatening our Society and the world at large. It's also a terrible way of assessing actual trustworthiness. It causes us not to engage in relationship with many faithful Friends, and it makes plenty of space for people who say the right things but are actually unreliable or even abusive.

I wish I had an easy answer here, a simple proposal we could all accept. But the truth is, our current methods for deciding who to trust are getting in our way, and possibly in God's way. At the

same time, our historical models may not be appropriate answers to the trustworthiness question in modern times. Ignoring the problem also isn't working. So what will the solution be?

No and Yes

“If you can't say no, then your yes is meaningless.”

A Friend said this to me years ago, and I've been thinking about it ever since. It seems to apply to a lot of things. I think about membership, for example, and how rarely a membership clearness committee returns with a recommendation that someone isn't ready. I think about times when inappropriate behavior goes unaddressed or when it's censured by dirty looks and not concrete statements or action. I think about budgetary processes, in which more is funded than we can afford because no one feels empowered to reject a request.

It's true that if we always say yes, our yes begins to lose its meaning. It stops being affirmation from the group, stops being a signal that our leading has been tested and found sound. It becomes, instead, a procedural hoop, in which the go-ahead comes not from corporate discernment but from filling out the paperwork correctly. A bureaucratic test is not what's needed and tends to reward insiders and people who have time to spare.

When I talk about building a permission-giving culture (which comes up in multiage inclusion workshops), I frame this same concern a bit differently. I talk about how often Friends' default answer is a negative one. No, we can't make a statement about that thing. No, we can't provide funding for that ministry. No, we can't try that new idea, not unless it's been approved by three committees first.

But where does that kind of no come from? It's not a Spirit-led no, in most cases. It's a bureaucratic, procedural no. We've built systems that make the no come automatically. Why? Because we're afraid we can't say it. If the system says no, we never have to. I've actually been in rooms where people have said, “This proposal is a good idea, but we can't say yes to it. If we did, we'd have to approve every other proposal that looks like this, even the bad ones.”

I really question this. Why on earth would we have to say yes to every proposal just because we've accepted one? Is it a misunderstanding of the testimony of equality? Do we not have the courage to rely on discernment? Or are we just afraid of what people might do if we tell them no?

There's tension about interpreting the testimony of equality, especially among more theologically liberal Friends. Some say that the testimony of equality means that everyone's contributions have exactly the same weight. Others say that the testimony of equality means everyone's contributions are worthy of being received and that God may speak through anyone, but God does not necessarily always speak equally through everyone. I'm sure there are those who'd want to craft a third definition. Personally, I lean toward the God-may-speak-through-anyone interpretation. We all have gifts, and we all carry messages sometimes, but they are neither the same gifts nor the same messages, and equality means seeing what God has given each person and nourishing that within them. It does not mean treating everybody exactly the same (though it does mean treating everybody with the same respect, consideration, and tenderness).

Of course, if we're not treating everybody exactly the same, then we're relying on discernment—especially corporate discernment—to figure out the right response. And I think we have good reason to doubt our own corporate discernment abilities. Friends have a history and present condition of racism, sexism, classism, ableism...I think we're doing better than our ancestors did, but we are a very long distance from perfect. "Isms" aside, other stuff gets in the way. Sometimes we discern wrongly out of ego, or fear, or exhaustion, or ignorance. This means that every time we rely on corporate discernment, we risk coming to the wrong conclusion.

We also risk making one or more people angry. What if we say no and somebody is upset? What if we say no and somebody leaves? It seems safer and easier to always say yes...except in areas where we can't always say yes, in which case we solve the problem by always saying no.

Relying on the Holy Spirit is not an especially safe activity. It's exciting and powerful, but it leads to mistakes. The thing is, when we make mistakes, we learn from them, and the next time we can hope to do better. When we strive for perfection in every decision, we do very little and learn even less.

We say that we believe in continuing revelation. Living as if we believe this is scary. But our institutions are intended to support our leadings from God. They are not intended to protect us from them. It's time to unfetter corporate discernment from institutional safeguards—at least a little bit—and to do that, we'll have to practice saying no and yes, even understanding that we will make mistakes.

Spiritual Gifts, Institutions, and Communities

Why don't we all think about Quaker institutions the same way? Why is it that one Friend can perceive an urgent problem while another seems to think there's no importance to the matter at all? How come some Friends participate actively in our committee systems while others appear to be disengaged?

We're not designed to be alike. As I've talked about often in other writings, we have different spiritual gifts, and that's because we're meant to be interdependent. A covenant community works like a jigsaw puzzle. Everyone brings a piece or two. And God does not intend for everybody to do exactly the same things. We all have spiritual gifts, and these gifts are for the purpose of sharing in community.

It's tricky to recognize spiritual gifts. We often don't realize our gifts *are* gifts. They come so naturally to us that we think everyone must have that ability. And we can overlook other people's gifts because sometimes they're so outside our frame of reference that we don't even perceive them. Or we might notice the annoying parts of someone else's giftedness and never realize the positive ways in which that gift acts in our community.

I'm going to give some examples to help you know what I'm talking about, but please don't read the following paragraphs as a complete list or limiting in any way. I'm not attempting to set up a full explanation of spiritual gifts here, just providing some context so I can make a deeper point.

Some gifts might be roughly categorized as *seeing* gifts. They change the ways in which we perceive the world. Some people may have knowledge or wisdom gifts, which help us see the world with an understanding of facts or emotional dynamics. Some people have prophecy gifts and perceive Truth about people and situations. Some have mercy gifts and notice suffering in a way that others might

not. Some have discernment gifts and have a natural recognition of spiritual dynamics. There are other possibilities.

Other gifts might be thought of as *loving* gifts. They change the ways in which our heart longs to touch other souls. A person with a gift of giving shows love by providing physical things, large or small. A person with a gift of hospitality shows love by inviting people in and making spaces. The gift of intercession draws a person to show love through prayer. A person with a gift of serving will show love by doing tasks for someone. Related, but not quite the same thing, are the gifts of exhortation, shepherding, and apostleship, which I've always thought of as closely connected. Someone with the gift of exhortation tends to love the person right in front of them with their whole heart. Someone with the gift of shepherding tends to love a group. Someone with the gift of apostleship tends to love groups of groups, large systemic bodies of people in which they may not even know the individuals. Again, there are other possibilities, and of course, people have multiple spiritual gifts.

A third category of gifts might be thought of as *doing* gifts. These tend to drive our behavior in the world. Administration...this person organizes. Evangelism...this person spreads excitement. Exorcism...this person liberates. Healing...this person restores health (physical, emotional, spiritual). Leadership...this person shows the way. Speaking...this person makes words that inspire. Teaching...this person instructs and makes clear. And yes, there are other possibilities.

(When I talk about spiritual gifts, I draw heavily from the writings of Jan Wood, which I strongly recommend reading. My interpretation differs from hers in some cases, but I will always be grateful to her for introducing me to these ideas.)

I'm talking about spiritual gifts in this series because as hard as it can be to understand and perceive spiritual gifts *in community*, it can be even harder to do it in relation *to our institutions*. Our institutions are meant to support our covenant communities, to provide the procedures and patterns that make it possible for us to discern and do God's will. The institution is not the same thing as the community. Thinking it is devalues certain gifts—and, by extension, certain individuals.

Let's imagine a person—we'll call her Ava—whose gifts include discernment (a natural recognition of spiritual dynamics), shepherding (a love for the group), and administration (responding to the world by organizing it). Quaker institutions lionize Ava. They tend to make her clerk of everything. And Ava will thrive, at least for a while, because Ava's natural desire—and what she does best—is to work with groups, perceiving the spiritual dynamics and organizing the appropriate response. It's like nominating a duck to the swimming committee.

Now imagine another person—we'll call him Benjamin—whose gifts include prophecy (perceiving truth), service (he shows love by doing tasks), intercession (he also shows love through prayer), and healing (he restores health). Benjamin spends a lot of time in the meetinghouse kitchen. He shows up every week, sits in worship for the first half hour, and then goes downstairs to start the coffee. During social hour, he's cutting the lemon squares and getting a head start on the dishes. Friends who've been around for a while know that when they're distressed, the thing to do is go into the kitchen and chat with Benjamin. He doesn't say a whole lot, but what he does say is always right on the money, and he listens so well that you can't help feeling better. The community likes Benjamin very much. The

institution less so, because Benjamin doesn't do the sorts of things that keep the institution running, at least on paper. He might serve on a committee or two, but his name never winds up in the minutes. Historians probably won't know there *was* a Benjamin. But he keeps the community going.

Our third imaginary person—let's call them Cameron—has gifts of mercy (perceives suffering in a way that others do not), hospitality (invites people in and makes welcoming spaces), evangelism (spreads excitement), speaking (uses words to inspire), and leadership (shows the way). If Cameron is fairly new to our community, we notice immediately that they're dynamic and personable and energetic and perceptive and articulate, and we're very excited about asking them to serve in some institutional roles. Any committee would do. We have a shortage of people, and Cameron is clearly an asset.

But when we react this way to the Camerons among us, we're missing the point. Because what Cameron actually wants to do—what they feel led to do—is open a drop-in center for people experiencing homelessness. If our attempts to suck them into committee service and clerking don't get in the way, Cameron will establish a new non-profit, build relationships with funders and with potential clients, and convince two churches, one synagogue, and a Buddhist temple to sign on as co-sponsors and provide volunteer counselors and hot meals.

Cameron does not need the opportunity to clerk the hospitality committee. It's possible that Cameron can do this and do their work, too, and there's nothing wrong with that. But clerking the hospitality committee is not the most authentic, most Spirit-led movement in Cameron's life. What Cameron needs from the meeting is a chance to worship with us, experience spiritual grounding and re-centering, and receive unconditional love. They could probably use a highly functional support committee. And they might need financial support, especially in the beginning.

If we're looking at Ava, Benjamin, and Cameron only through the lens of the institution's needs, we can easily frame the situation this way: Ava is an asset to the institution, Benjamin is mildly helpful, and Cameron is a drain. Institutions naturally perpetuate themselves, which is both a good thing and a bad thing. If we forget to contextualize the institution in God's wider design, then we will unintentionally devalue Cameron and probably Benjamin, as well. Or we'll try to redirect their energy and gifts into running the institution—which may not be what God needs from either one of them.

I work with institutions because that's where my spiritual giftedness leads me. But our institutions (our committee structures and our formal, documented procedures), though we need them, are not ends unto themselves. If an institution is not able to support and implement the discernment and nurture and leadings of the covenant community and the people within it, then that institution is interfering with God's work. That's the opposite of what we need it to do. And if the covenant community does not recognize and value Cameron and Benjamin as much as Ava, then we're missing out. We're narrowing the definition of God's work, and "who is it that dare stop Christ's mouth?"

Everybody—every Friend—has a fundamental responsibility to participate in and contribute to our worship and corporate discernment. That's how Quaker practice works. Every Friend also has a fundamental responsibility to serve the meeting. But I would argue that this is not the same thing as serving the institution. Ava, Benjamin, and Cameron are all serving the meeting. They're just doing it in

different ways...ways that are appropriate to their own gifts and callings. Ministry is always service to the meeting, even if it happens in the kitchen or far outside the meetinghouse walls.

One last thing. Ava's probably tired. After all, we're making her clerk everything. And let's not burn her out, but my perspective is this: if we don't have enough Avas, then let's try to whittle down our institutional functions. We can usually do that, at least somewhat, and it feels more faithful than sacrificing other Spirit-led ministry on the altar of the institution. The institution is not the community, and it's not the kingdom of God on Earth. It's just a set of procedures that's supposed to help us get things done.

Humanity

“Thinking of a church as a system of productivity does not reach the depths of what the church is for or why people associate with churches. When participants recite a creed or sing a hymn from memory, when they kneel at an altar rail, when they give a Saturday to cook food for the homeless, something ... is going on that can only be addressed with a narrative not of progress but of presence, not of productivity but of place...If I want to know you, I have to get beyond types and learn your story, the narrative through which you make your life in all its twists and turns, ambiguities and uncertainties.” (from *The Soul of the Congregation* by Thomas Edward Frank)

There's almost always a way to make the institution more efficient. And the conference can have better workshop facilitators. And the newsletter can be more visually pleasing. And the meeting can grow. And the garden can be prettier.

But is that the point?

The purpose of most Quaker institutions is to support God's work in our communities. But what's the purpose of the communities? Why do groups of Friends exist?

I think we exist to discern and do the will of God, and that looks like a lot of different things. Historically, Friends have experienced God asking us to listen—asking us to preach—asking us to care for each other—asking us to bear witness in the world. Sometimes the purpose of the Quaker community is to join (or lead) the nonviolent protest, to stand face to face against injustice, to be arrested, to prevent harm or, at least, to shine a spotlight on that harm. And sometimes the purpose of the Quaker community is to make sure the parent who's just had surgery doesn't have to worry about dinner. Oftentimes, I think it's both.

We also exist to recognize and nurture each other's gifts and ministries, and if we're doing that, we have to make space for Friends to learn. Sometimes we intentionally invite the less experienced speaker, rather than the more experienced speaker, because at this moment the nurture of the new gift is the most important thing. Sometimes we don't hire the highly experienced, talented professional gardener because Diane loves to care for the flowers and because we all really love Diane.

I think there's real value in writing about institutions. If I didn't, I'd stop doing it. But over time, I've learned that the most efficient “top ten steps to success” is not a complete answer for many

communities. Because we're not a business. We're not making widgets. What we're doing is making space for spiritual transformation.

When I work with specific communities close-up, rather than describing patterns from 20,000 feet, I try to understand first how things are working. What the handbook says is less interesting to me than what people are actually doing. Then, I wonder why the community is doing things in that way. Rather than immediately thinking we need to redesign the newsletter, I try to find out who designed that newsletter and what's important to them and what need it met historically. Sometimes it turns out there's a guy named Emmett who edits the newsletter who calls every member of the meeting once a month and asks how they're doing and what he should write about, and it turns out Emmett is actually 75% of the meeting's pastoral care system, and at that point, who cares about his word processing skills?

On the other hand, there is a temptation in our communities to give over our whole institution to whatever Emmett and Diane need. That's not good, either, because sometimes the peculiarities of the system we've built are serving individuals at the cost of the rest of the community. We weigh Diane's passion for gardening against what groups renting the building have to say about the state of the flowers. We often won't agree on which to prioritize. Those of us whose spiritual gifts have a lot to do with one-on-one nurture will always tend to lean towards Diane. Those of us whose spiritual gifts have a lot to do with practical perspective will always tend to lean toward the professional gardener. We listen as deeply as we can to ourselves and to Spirit, and then we make the best choice we can. And repeat.

Our institutions and our communities are never really the big picture we can describe. They are the culmination of many thousands of tiny decisions, like pointillism. And like painters using pointillism, we have to be aware simultaneously of the bigger picture we're aiming for and the impact of each little human moment. It's those little human moments that create the rest. Without them, any vision, no matter how beautiful, can never materialize.

Belonging: The Community or the Institution

Something really interesting has been happening with membership.

In the past ten years, a number of Quaker groups have tried to figure out how to adjust their membership structures to include Friends who, for one reason or another, feel themselves to be Quakers but don't feel themselves to be part of a specific monthly meeting near them. New York Yearly Meeting, for example, has established an at-large membership in the yearly meeting. The New Association of Friends allows for individual membership from afar, and so does Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative), though for slightly different reasons and with very different guidelines. There are other yearly meetings, and some monthly meetings, with similar membership pathways.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, online worship became far more common than it had been before. This led to some additional membership complications. Some Friends began worshipping regularly with meetings that were geographically far away. In some cases, it was a matter of returning to a meeting with which they had worshipped many years before. In other cases, it was more about finally

being able to join a meeting that felt more theologically or culturally familiar than any meeting close by. What has happened with these Friends' memberships has varied greatly.

More complicated still is the development of worship communities that are not meetings nor under the care of any meeting but that now feel like the primary Quaker affiliation for some Friends, such as online worship connected with a Quaker retreat center (of which there are several). These worship communities officially cannot hold membership at all, and some Friends are wondering why not.

Questions about the relevance of membership go back decades. There are Friends who believe we shouldn't have any such concept. Others don't object to the existence of membership, but they feel it's unimportant or simply something they'd prefer not to pursue. Many Quaker meetings disregard or deemphasize rules about how non-member attenders are allowed to participate in the meeting, and others have explicitly decided to overturn such rules. On the other hand, there are Friends' meetings that are very strict about membership. In a few rare cases, non-members aren't even permitted to speak in business meetings.

Many Friends have membership in meetings that they haven't attended for many years. In some cases, that's for emotional reasons. In others, it's just about not bothering with a formal transfer or leaving Quakerism entirely without formally telling anybody. This isn't just an annoyance in our paperwork. For some meetings, having dozens of distant, out-of-touch members is a genuine hardship because the yearly meeting still functions by apportionment—a system that used to be dominant among Quakers in which financial contributions to the yearly meeting were determined by the number of members in each monthly meeting. A lot of yearly meetings have moved away from that system, but some haven't, and some local meetings pay hundreds or thousands of dollars each year on behalf of Friends they never see.

Membership means a lot of different things, both according to various yearly meeting's books of discipline and according to individual Friends' beliefs. We have no agreement about what is necessary to become a member (if anything) nor what the formal procedure might be nor what obligations and privileges come with membership. It was an institutional stop-gap measure from the beginning, dating back to a time when we needed formal membership records because so many Friends were being thrown in prison and so many Friends' children needed care and we were having a hard time keeping track of everybody. But like most institutional procedures, the purpose it serves today is not perfectly aligned with its original purpose. Which doesn't mean it isn't serving a purpose. It just means that purpose isn't terribly clear.

I'm thinking back to what Friends have said about sacraments, specifically baptism, which early Friends absolutely believed in. They just said it was an internal, spiritual conversion and not an external ceremony involving water. I've wondered whether we could say that membership is an external recognition of an existing truth, the same way that recording is an external recognition of an existing truth—is membership simply the practice of our writing down a recognition of spiritual baptism? I think it only works if we believe that spiritual baptism—which we might also call “being convinced”—necessarily includes God committing us to a covenant community. Because membership, as we've

practiced it historically, has a lot to do with mutual responsibility and care. And Quaker theology does imply that a Quaker path requires community.

I can imagine a lot of Friends skimming over that last paragraph, wondering why obscure historical theological connections would even be relevant to membership today. The thing is, most groups of Friends don't have an agreed-upon modern theology of membership, so the historical roots are all we have to draw on...unless we're willing to engage seriously in corporate discernment on the meaning of membership, which would take a lot of energy and time.

Membership for individuals, it seems to me, can only be one of three things. It might be an external recognition of an existing truth, an affirmation that a person belongs and is one of us. Or it might be a ritual that, in the doing, causes a person belong and be one of us. Or it might be a matter of paperwork that is relevant only for statistical purposes.

I experienced membership as the second of these possibilities: a ritual that, in the doing, caused me to belong and be one of the Friends of Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting. From my point of view, there was a transition in belongingness that happened when the meeting minuted my acceptance. It was even worded that way: "accept into membership." I could not have detailed, in the moment, what exactly I was committing to. No one had had that conversation with me. But I did see the minuting as a two-sided agreement that transformed my relationship with the community. And I wanted that very much, partly because my upbringing had taught me to value rituals of belonging, and so I was looking for one.

Trouble is, that's not in keeping with Friends' theology more generally. We don't believe in the necessity of performative rituals in order to enact spiritual truths. And I probably could have accepted that, if it had been explained to me. I probably could have understood that membership was a recognition of a pre-existing spiritual reality. I already belonged. We were just naming it.

If we go with that definition—membership as recognition of a preexisting spiritual truth—then we can probably eliminate a lot of our recent institutional angst. There's been so much worry about which groups can hold membership, and how can a person be a member in a worship group, and can a Friend be a member directly of a yearly meeting, and what are the implications of these different possibilities? We fret and we fuss. How can we possibly make sure everybody is cared for if we change our institutional definitions of membership?

But if membership is a recognition of a preexisting spiritual truth, then we need not worry about a lot of these things. A Friend requesting membership in a non-traditional structural way is doing so because they are recognizing a pre-existing relationship of mutual responsibility and care. God already did it. We don't have to figure out how to do it.

The natural result of looking at membership this way is that membership can be issued by any group, held in any group as a recognition of the existing spiritual relationships, and released at such time as the God-given relationship of mutual responsibility and care within that group ends. Sometimes people move on in their spiritual path, or they simply become part of another community. Under this definition of membership, it would seem that membership would automatically move on with them. I feel like this simplifies the matter considerably.

It's also possible that membership is a form without Life and needs to be laid down. The original historical necessity certainly isn't relevant anymore, and the statistical purposes could probably be served by counting heads at worship. Could we name and claim covenant spiritual relationships without official membership? I suspect we could, and truth told, in most cases, membership is not used and explained as a recognition of covenant spiritual relationship anyway.

A lot of the work done about membership lately, especially by young adults, has been about helping Friends in general understand that the institutional practices need to change to reflect what God is doing in our communities. Spiritual belonging simply isn't happening exclusively in multi-decade relationships within geographically local communities, but our institutional patterns continue to assume that it is.

What's the best way for Quaker institutions to support and nurture what God is doing with belonging in our covenant communities? It's a bigger question than rewriting paragraph three of the membership section of *Faith and Practice*, and ultimately, I suspect that's more appropriate than trying to tweak our existing structures. We haven't tweaked the way life is lived and relationships are maintained in the 21st century. We have radically redefined it. An equally radical redefinition of membership is probably the only way to reflect what God is doing now.

Continuing Revelation and the Nature of Truth

The phrase "my truth" isn't listed in Merriam-Webster, even though it's infiltrated most aspects of society. I hear it in phrases like "you gotta live your truth" and "hey, I'm just speaking my truth."

It seems to me like "my truth" really means "the set of feelings and beliefs that I've gathered from my life experiences." Those sets of feelings and beliefs are very important. I don't want to belittle anyone's experiences, nor the ways in which people have been formed by them. That said, one's feelings and beliefs as derived from experience are not the same thing as "truth." It can certainly be true that what we're saying accurately reflects our feelings and beliefs. That is different from whether what we're saying is true.

"My truth" may have started as a phrase to reclaim power. There are people in this world who've been repeatedly told that their experiences and knowledge are not valid, due to race or sex or age or ability. Still more complicated are situations of gaslighting, where people (often in abusive relationships) are deliberately made to doubt the veracity of their own experiences. It has been and continues to be important that people who have been disempowered, individually or societally, be encouraged to reclaim their voices and their right to be heard.

From this point of view, the phrase "my truth" might be an effort to level the playing field, to insist that no person (usually meaning wealthy white males) has ownership of truth. No one gets to categorically decide what is true and enforce that decision upon everyone else. That's certainly a dynamic that has played out in the past, and it continues to play out in situations of privilege and, perhaps especially notably, in the information wars of our time. Many journalists and politicians, in

addition to some educators, attempt to sell lies, opinions, or theories as fact, and there is usually a power or profit motive behind this.

The trouble I see—and this is not an original thought, of course—is that the phrase “my truth” implies “your truth” and also “their truth.” It supports the idea that no one can own and enforce truth at the expense of others, and that’s a good thing. But it does this by suggesting that there is no such thing as universal truth, and that’s not good at all.

When we accept the idea that everyone’s truth is equally valid, we undermine the concept of expertise. Some people say this is good, that so-called experts often hold positions of power and are likely to abuse that power. Unfortunately, in a practical sense, eliminating all respect for expertise leads to chaos. Architects and contractors know better than doctors how prevent a building from falling down. Doctors know better than communications specialists how to heal a compound fracture. Communications specialists know better than engineers how to explain a complicated concept to a large group of people. And so forth. Taken to an extreme, the “my truth” perspective on the world destabilizes public trust of everything and leads to ineffectiveness and danger.

Among Quakers, this phrase “my truth”—which does show up sometimes—reflects our own tendency to undermine expertise, and it confuses expertise with hierarchical positional spiritual authority, which Quakers do explicitly reject. But our institutions can often benefit from expertise. The retired librarian probably knows better than the rest of us how to archive records. The tax accountant understands budgets. The psychologist has a head start on pastoral care, and the teacher probably has a good idea how to present new items of business. We do a reasonable job of letting these various experts do things that the rest of us don’t want to do or don’t care very much about, but when it comes to highly emotional issues, we often reject the advice of our experts, sometimes at our detriment.

There’s a bigger problem, though, with the phrase “my truth” in Quaker circles, and I don’t think the words themselves are at fault. I think they’re representative of a movement in wider society in which we decide what’s true based on what we find palatable or convenient. For Quakers, the idea of relative truth is directly in conflict with our theology, and it sometimes confuses us so much that it prevents one of our most fundamental practices, which is corporate discernment.

Quakers believe in continuing revelation. That is, we believe that God continues to speak to us, that new divine truths are being revealed. We also say that revelation can be spoken by anyone. But we recognized early on that we listen better in the context of community. We test important leadings and new revelations by listening to the Spirit in a group of people, and together, we find sense of the meeting. This is more likely to be closer to real Truth than the individual discernment of any one person. To do corporate discernment is to trust the group’s sense over our own, even if we initially disagree.

When we, as Friends, speak during the process of corporate discernment, what we each say individually cannot be called “my truth.” For one thing, we are not convinced that we as individuals *are* speaking truth. We are trying to speak truth, but we don’t know for sure that we are. That’s why we’re testing the idea with the community. For another, my words as spoken in corporate discernment do not belong to me. They belong to Spirit, who I hope inspired them, and they belong to the group, which will now use and test them. Humility is a fundamental root of the Quaker discernment

process, as is the willingness to submit to the group's discernment, once that discernment has been done. That isn't possible when individuals are coming from the perspective of, "Hey, I gotta live my truth." It only works if we believe there *is* such a thing as Truth, and that while this Truth is complicated and continuously revealed, it is also real and discoverable by the community.

Is it ever the case that in Quaker community more powerful people and groups carry the day, and our corporate discernment is influenced by racism or sexism or other societal forces not in keeping with our theology? Of course. I just don't think we can solve this by eliminating the belief in the existence of truth. I think we solve this by leaning forward into corporate discernment, by practicing the concepts of humility and trusting the group, and by repeatedly reminding ourselves—especially those of us who may be more societally powerful—that God may speak through any of us and that sense of the meeting does not mean majority rule, nor is it a way to excuse perpetuating the status quo.

Ultimately, I think that the corporate discernment done in covenant community is all about seeking Truth. I also think it's reasonable and sensible for our institutions to rely on expertise of individuals when acting upon and supporting that Truth. In addition, the sets of feelings and beliefs that each of us have gathered through the experiences of our lifetimes are very important. But they don't replace either corporately discerned Truth or expertise, nor can either of those things replace our individual experiences. Each type of knowingness is essential. And yet, they are not the same.

Splits, Reunifications, and Covenant

My local meeting has some specific practices about membership. Some of these are in *Faith and Practice*, and others are just habits we've developed over time. A Friend requesting membership writes a (usually physical) letter to the clerk explaining why. We receive this in business meeting and transfer it to the pastoral care committee. They set up a clearness committee. The clearness committee reports back a recommendation to approve (or not approve) the membership. We accept the recommendation in meeting for business, but first the letter is read aloud. The new member receives a hug from the clerk and a welcoming committee that throws a little party for them, possibly with cake.

If someone is transferring their membership, they also write a letter to the clerk. We receive this in business meeting and transfer it to the pastoral care committee. The pastoral care committee calls the new meeting to check on the person's relationship with them: are they in relationship, and will they be cared for? If so, we approve the transfer in business meeting.

If someone is withdrawing their membership, which doesn't happen often, they (you guessed it) write a letter to the clerk. We receive this in business meeting and transfer it to the pastoral care committee. The pastoral care committee talks to the person, if possible. We approve the release of membership in business meeting.

At least half these steps are strangely ritualistic, but I think they were all established for solid theological reasons, which I'm pretty sure I can reverse-engineer. Letters go to the clerk and business meeting first so we all know what's happening before it happens, because the meeting is a covenant community and is about to change its composition. The letters have to be printed and signed so the

documentation can't be lost in somebody's email inbox, because membership records will matter to Friends in the future. Pastoral care checks in with the person, and there are clearness committees and calls to meetings receiving transfers, because we want to know that everyone is spiritually clear to move forward. Mutual accountability and corporate discernment are part of our commitment to covenant community. The hug and possible cake demonstrate our joy in receiving a new member. Final acceptance happens in business meeting because we have faith in corporate discernment.

In a previous essay, I said that our membership processes might need to change radically to reflect our modern times, but that doesn't mean we have to stop making sure the people in the covenant community know each other, anticipating the needs of Friends in the future, attending to spiritual clearness, expressing joy, and having faith in corporate discernment. We don't have to change our underlying theology, just what it looks like to manifest it appropriately.

But there's another type of membership that I haven't yet addressed. When I became a member of 15th Street Monthly Meeting, I also became a member—automatically—of New York Quarterly Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting, Friends General Conference, Friends United Meeting, Friends World Committee for Consultation, and the Religious Society of Friends. Each of these is one of my covenant communities.

Why did I become a member of all these things when I became a member of 15th Street? Why did I not have to go through individual clearness committees to join each of the larger communities? Because 15th Street Monthly Meeting has *membership* in New York Quarterly Meeting. New York Quarterly Meeting has *membership* in New York Yearly Meeting. New York Yearly Meeting has *membership* in three different umbrella organizations, each of which is separately organized: Friends General Conference, Friends United Meeting, and Friends World Committee for Consultation. We don't always use the word "membership" to talk about these types of organizational relationships. Sometimes we use the word "affiliation." But we're not affiliates. We're members. The larger groups are composed of the smaller groups, just as the smaller groups are composed of individuals. That tells me that Quaker groups, themselves, have membership.

The situation is a lot more complicated because each larger Quaker group is both a covenant community and an institution. New York Quarterly Meeting is a community of all the Friends in New York City, but we use the exact same phrase to refer to the institutional structure that supports that community, its ministries, and its financial affairs and property. But the institution and the covenant community are not the same thing.

When splits happen, or reunifications, what exactly is splitting and what is reunifying? The actions we take usually relate exclusively to the institutions. Setting up new clerks, new committee systems, new bank accounts. Deciding who keeps the pipe organ, the offerings box, the oven mitts. But our words and emotions reflect a split of the covenant community. Name-calling... scapegoating... grieving... crying. I think the institution splits only if the covenant community already did.

And that doesn't mean that if Meeting A, Meeting B, and Meeting C end up in the Turquoise Yearly Meeting while Meeting D, Meeting E, and Meeting F end up in the Goldenrod Yearly Meeting, then the covenant community first split along those exact lines. It means that some group of people,

somewhere along the way, stopped making sure the people in the covenant community know each other, anticipating the needs of Friends in the future, attending to spiritual clearness, expressing joy, and having faith in corporate discernment. Which meant the covenant community had fractured. Which eventually meant the institution did, too, because a single institution can't effectively support a fractured covenant community. Those of us who have either experienced or studied splits know that the division of the institution is never so neat as allowing all the covenant relationships to fall tidily on the two different sides. It's a lot more painful than that, ultimately more like shattering than slicing.

Most Quakers don't read individual Friends out of meeting anymore. It's still part of our books of discipline in many places, but the actual practice isn't common. In the 19th century, it was very common. We removed Friends from membership in a meeting because they weren't behaving in accordance with our collectively discerned standards, and in retrospect, sometimes those standards were downright silly. I once found a minute from my own meeting, 15th Street, from the 1830s, in which we read a woman out of meeting for not wearing enough underwear. (Who checked?) We didn't do it right away. We sent the elders to her house first. But when she didn't repent and repair her behavior, we said she was no longer in membership with us.

(Some of you historians are wondering, "Which 15th Street? Wasn't New York Yearly Meeting divided in the 1830s?" You're right. It was. 15th Street was the Hicksite meeting. The Orthodox met on 20th Street. They probably patrolled women's underwear, too.)

I laugh about this story, but it wasn't funny to the people it happened to. Both the Friends read out of meeting and the Friends who read other people out of meeting were probably broken-hearted. And sometimes, the infractions were very morally serious, like enslavement or deceitful business practices or smuggling or engaging in violence. Nobody was read out of meeting right away. First, they were confronted about their behavior. If they didn't change, then they were kicked out. Still allowed to worship with the community, by the way—just not to hold membership or recordings, nor participate in corporate discernment nor be married under the care of the meeting. In other words, outside of the covenant.

Even when the reading-out procedure is officially still in *Faith and Practice*, there's often no living memory of it happening, and many Friends are horrified by the concept. But I hear Friends talk about disaffiliation all the time. Leaving a yearly meeting, kicking another meeting out of a yearly meeting, leaving an umbrella organization, kicking another group out of an umbrella organization. Why does this not feel the same to us? Are we comfortable saying that we refuse to be in covenant with someone because of their behavior, or are we not comfortable with that? Do we read members out of meeting or don't we? Because whether it's an individual or a group that has membership in our community, I feel like we're talking about the same basic thing.

Truth told, there's only one reason we can even discuss splits and disaffiliation, and it's because we can pretend the institution is the community. We can find ways to split an institution on paper. We can make words with legal power that cause it to happen. But we don't have an easy way to sever the covenant. Because God makes covenants, while lawyers make institutions.

How do we hold the covenant community together? Make sure the people know each other. Anticipate the needs of Friends in the future. Attend to spiritual clearness. Express joy. Have faith in corporate discernment. These are some of the things that we can do to maintain the health of a covenant community. When those things aren't happening, we're in danger of fracturing, which is likely to lead—eventually—to an institutional split. I mention these fundamental practices here so we can try, all of us, to notice unhealthy patterns before the community is irreconcilably fractured. Notice and say no to damaging behaviors.

But no matter what else happens, there's one community we've never completely kicked a group out of, and that's the Religious Society of Friends. How would we do it? The Religious Society of Friends doesn't have an institution. There's no way to write down the kicking-outing. The Religious Society of Friends is a covenant community only. No matter what we do in our regions, our yearly meetings, and our umbrella organizations—regardless of what institution a group may separate itself from—we can't kick a group out of the covenant community of the Religious Society of Friends, not if they want to stay. Our spiritual ancestors are their spiritual ancestors. We are stuck with them as long as they are still committed to being Friends, as long as there is still a remnant of commitment to being in corporate discernment within the covenant community called Friends. A group can leave the covenant community, but I don't see any way for the rest of us to kick them out. Ultimately, by the very nature of covenant, the group that decides to break it is the group that finds itself leaving it.

It feels both true and hopeful to me that no matter what the institutional paperwork says, no one can make any of us not be in covenant relationship with each other. The relationships can be made harder, emotionally and practically, by the institutional divisions. But the covenant can't be ended unless one of us decides to break it.

(I do not intend to break it.)

The Reunification Epistle of New York Yearly Meeting

Dear Friends:

This is the message of our love.

We have been united with you this week in closer fellowship which transcended our diversity, as New York Yearly Meeting became again one body of Friends. We wish to share with you our joy that the way to unity has been found.

We shall continue to share our differences, which serve a useful purpose. God does not ask us for conformity, but calls us to unity, in obedience to the leadings of the spirit.

We seek to recapture the radiance of simple, uncomplicated love...such love as will resist evil without violence, without hatred of the wrongdoer, and without compromise.

To the false standards of our time we would offer the greatest opposition, combined with the greatest love. To the lonely seekers in this hurried and soul-hiding world, we would say, "Dear Friends, we are walking beside you...seekers, too."

Have loving kindness toward one another. Have faith in the Lord, and he will help you.

Signed on behalf of New York Yearly Meeting

Horace R. Stubbs, Alfred J. Henderson, clerks, August 4, 1955

On Power

“Power: a possession of control, authority, or influence over others.” – Merriam-Webster

“Keep in the power of God.” – George Fox

“Power: the ability to influence or control what people do or think.” – MacMillan

“Persons who walk disorderly are to be spoken to in private, then before two or three witnesses; then, if necessary, the matter is to be reported to the Church. The Church is to reprove them for their disorderly walking, and, if they do not reform, the case is to be sent in writing “to some whom the Lord hath raised up in the power of the Spirit of the Lord to be fathers, His children to gather in the light” so that the thing may be known to the body and be determined in the light.” – The Elders at Balby

“Power: ability to control people or events.” – Cambridge

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.” – Isaiah 40:29

“Power: the ability to control people or things.” – Oxford

*“Is every aspect of your life open to the transforming power of God? What stands in the way?” –
New England Yearly Meeting Advices and Queries*

“But I don’t have any power. I don’t want power. That’s what I love about Quakerism—neither I nor anyone else has any power.”

I heard that statement years ago in the context of a private conversation with someone serving in a clerking position. I understood where the Friend was coming from. Not long before, I’d thought similarly. *Quakers don’t have leaders. In Quakerism everybody is equal. We’re non-hierarchical. Nobody can tell anyone else what to do or believe.* That’s what I’d heard since my first day in a Quaker meeting. And I believed the messaging that no Friend had any particular power.

Some of you might be astonished that I could ever have believed such a thing. Others might still believe it and wonder where I’m going with this. Both mindsets are understandable and depend a lot on one’s formative experiences, both in life generally and in Quakerism specifically.

If one’s power-related experiences have mostly been connected with explicit and named authority, then it’s easy to believe that individual Quakers don’t have different levels of power. Explicit, named authority is what happens in boss-employee relationships, some parent-child relationships, and some teacher-student relationships. There are other examples. They are the kind of relationships in

which “you’ll do it because I said so” is something the person in authority can say, regardless of whether they actually say it. The power differential is obvious and named and generally socially acceptable. Anyone who’s lived a life primarily in such authority relationships, either as the authority or as the person under authority, will probably grow to think of power as something explicitly named and recognized.

If one’s power-related experiences have often related to implicit, unnamed power, it’s much easier to perceive individual Quakers’ different levels of power. These are the kinds of relationships in which the system in place, which is often unofficial but nevertheless very real, gives one person more ability than the other to manipulate the results of interactions. “You’ll do it because I said so” isn’t and can’t be articulated because no official authority exists. But the person who has less power always knows the situation is rigged. The person with more power might or might not know. They don’t have to be fully conscious of it; things tend to work out in their favor seemingly naturally. If we’ve been hurt by invisible power systems, we very quickly become perceptive of power. That’s a survival mechanism.

I can think of five ways in which Friends have differing levels of power. You might be able to name other ways. Having power, in itself, is not a bad thing, nor has the individual necessarily chosen to have it. The system is set up in such a way that some people get it, and I don’t know of any wide-scale system that could function if no one had any individual power of any kind. What matters is how people with power use it.

One form of power Friends have is positional. A clerking position is a good example. The clerk, by virtue of having been named clerk, gets to decide who speaks when, what does and doesn’t go on the agenda, and where things are placed on the agenda (knowing that items at the top are more likely to get done). The clerk is sometimes, though not always, deferred to as having authority. Invisible cues tell us this person is powerful: they are sitting in the center, often at a table, with a microphone. They speak first and last in the context of the meeting. There are other forms of positional power. Recording clerks have some influence over how the sense of the meeting is worded, and in contentious or historically significant matters, this often has considerable impact. Staff members have power, usually not over what they do but certainly over how they do it. Anyone serving on a committee has a certain amount of power, which can be expressed either by bringing something forward or by slowing something down or refusing to consider it. In some cases, positional power is slight. In other cases, it’s substantial.

Another form of power is disproportionately sized influence as a result of reputation. We call Friends with this type of power “weighty,” though that framing is complicated, and I’ll say more about it in the next paragraph. Some Friends have established a general trustworthiness over long years of service to the community. They may have strong gifts or relevant experiences. When weighty Friends speak or act, what they express has extra impact.

A third form of power might be described as belonging to Friends who are more likely to be perceived as weighty. I believe this is complicated because I think the concept of “weighty Friends” is valid but also recognize that some Friends are more likely than others to be perceived as weighty, regardless of actual gifts or experiences. This type of power comes entirely from other people’s perceptions. In most Quaker communities, a Friend who is aging will have this type of power, but

possibly not if they are extremely elderly. In the United States, white Friends have this power, as do men. Class is relevant, and level of education, though which class and which level of education bestow this type of power differs by region. This type of power is also given to Friends who have the right kind of Quaker voice for the particular group, by which I mean they have the “right” words and the “right” speaking patterns and, in some cases, the “right” accent or tone of voice.

Another form of power comes from exceeding expectations, especially if a Friend is young. In many Quaker communities, teenagers or young adults will automatically get extra attention if they speak impactfully or take on positions of service. This happens when youth is both rare and idealized. The power is limited, especially if the young person is trying to challenge the status quo, but it’s there.

The final type of power that I can think of is power held by the dissenting minority. In Quakerism, by design, the individual or small group of people that disagrees with the majority has much more power than a dissenting minority does in most other situations. Depending on a number of social and spiritual and practical factors, they may or may not have the power to change the outcome, but they almost always have enough power to slow things down and be listened to.

I’ll restate for anyone who might be bristling that having power is neither a good nor a bad thing, and it is only sometimes something that we have chosen to have or that we even want. (The types of power I described third and fourth, which have to do with societal privilege, are bad in the sense that in the ideal world they would not exist. But it’s not immoral for a person to have such power. The power’s existence is not due to a moral failing of the individual person who has it.)

I believe that we get ourselves and others into trouble only when we use our power badly, and that includes acting as though it doesn’t exist. Ignoring our power leads to the abuse of it because we will inevitably, even if unintentionally, use it to forward our own desires over the needs and desires of those with less power.

In his epistles, George Fox reminded Friends again and again to “keep in the power of the Lord.” He meant that we should submit ourselves to God, who will show us our shortcomings, heal our brokenness, and transform our spirits. The prophet Isaiah says that God “increases the power of the weak.” I won’t pretend to know exactly what Isaiah meant, but I suspect God does this in the context of community rather than bestowing powers upon the weak and leaving the powerful alone entirely. I suspect God works in our hearts to make us conscious of the ways we have power and humble enough to ask for guidance in using it wisely...to ask God how we might best use it, and also to ask those less powerful than we.

If I were to suggest queries about power for Friends (including myself), I’d offer something like the following list. What would you add?

Do I keep in the power of God?

Do I strive to be conscious of what power I have, and when, and over whom or what, regardless of whether I asked for that power or whether I want it?

Do I listen when I am told I have power? Am I attentive to those who have less power? Do I use my power on behalf of the needs and desires of others? Am I careful to advocate for what people tell me they need, rather than what I believe they need?

Am I open to being transformed in the use of my power? What stands in the way?

Destined to Fail

In my sophomore year of university, I had to take a sewing class. It wasn't about homemaking but costuming. All theatre majors had to take a class that involved basic wardrobe construction, set building, and electrical wiring. My wardrobe task was making a ditty bag. These are roughly rectangular thingamajigs sewn directly on hangers. They have a variety of large open pockets (for shoes or purses), small open pockets (for mic packs), zippered pockets (for costume jewelry), and netted pockets (for tights and underwear). Ditty bags don't have to be tidy, and they don't have to fit anybody. Nobody sees them but the actors and dressers. In other words, their construction was assigned to beginners because they are so ridiculously easy.

It took me so long to make my ditty bag that the rest of the class was delayed waiting for me. It took days. I sewed on pockets upside down. I stitched the sides together by accident repeatedly. I threaded my bobbin backwards. Whole pieces were inside out for reasons I couldn't understand. At one point, I put a sewing machine needle directly through a straight pin and got the whole works tangled up so badly that the machine had to be disassembled. When my TA discovered what I'd done, she stared at me. "I didn't think that was possible." My final evaluation read *tried hard, didn't cry*.

I'm neither stupid nor incompetent, but my brain didn't come with a construction setting. When I'm asked to produce something physical—out of fabric, wood, metal, paper—I cannot process the instructions I'm given, nor can I come up with my own strategy. Those of you who can make things are like magicians to me. I cannot understand what you're doing even while I'm watching you do it.

Many years later, I clerked a committee that had a four-person subgroup charged with a specific task. Their assignment, though not something the group could rush through, wasn't very hard from my point of view. It required arranging to speak to some people, then speaking with them, then spending some time in discernment about what had been said, and then coming to a decision about a particular question. Done very efficiently, it might have taken two months. Even six months would have been within reason.

Every three months, I asked the group to report to the committee. They did not seem to make progress. Ever. First they'd had trouble scheduling a meeting of their own group. Then they'd made a phone call to someone who never called back. The third time the group reported, it wasn't clear that anything had happened at all since the last meeting. I asked if they needed another member to help. "No—if we added someone else to the group, we'd have to start over." I asked what *would* be helpful. "We just need time."

Unfortunately, people were counting on this group. The delay had very real consequences. After a year and a half, I finally said in a committee meeting, "It seems like this just isn't working. Do we need to lay down the group, thanking them for their service, and create a new group to take on this task?" I'll never forget how people looked at me—as though I had threatened to hit somebody.

We couldn't say no.

The people on the subgroup were all deeply spiritual people with discernment gifts, but in retrospect, I see that none of them had very strong executive function – the types of mental abilities required to create and execute a set of steps toward a long-term goal, such as organizing tasks, deciding who would do which things, remembering deadlines, and returning phone calls. There's no real difference between this and my own brain's inability to sew a ditty bag. But because our committee didn't recognize the absence of this particular skill within the subgroup, we had set them up to fail. As clerk, I could have done a lot of things differently, both in terms of offering help and in creating a culture that made it easier to receive help. But best would have been constituting the group more thoughtfully to begin with. We needed discerners *and* organizers on the team.

This kind of dynamic happens so often among Friends. We have good theories. We say that our nominating committees will thoughtfully consider the gifts of each member of the group, placing Friends on committees that use and develop those gifts. Unfortunately, we have a lot of situations in which nominating committees have become pretty desperate. They're under pressure to fully staff everything, and we don't have as many people as slots. This is complicated by the fact that some people's strongest gifts aren't well suited for anything we've designated as work for a committee. Amazing, gifted, spiritually grounded human beings are placed in positions that don't match their gifts simply because we have not recognized and named a position that does. When this happens, they (and the rest of us) quite reasonably respond with frustration. Why can't the work just get done?

There are other ways we set each other up to fail. One is asking people to take on tasks they don't have time to do. In some cases, service as clerk or treasurer or on a ministry and counsel committee can take as many hours as a part-time job. This might (or might not) be okay for a retiree, but it's definitely not for a forty-two-year-old parent of three with a full-time job as a school custodian. Other times, we set up a paid position or offer an honorarium for some particular work, but we underpay so severely that the Friend isn't able to cover basic bills or have health insurance. Our historical resistance to hiring ministry and our general discomfort about discussing money tend to overshadow conversations about what is just. And still other times, we create a committee or a working group to solve some difficult problem, and when the Friends return to us with suggestions after many months of labor, we either decline to approve those suggestions or fail to ever implement them—because we didn't really want to change, and just creating the working group felt like we'd done enough.

Efficiency isn't really the point. Friends' current institutional structures are often inefficient, and sometimes that's a problem, but what's more important is that we're hurting people. In many of our institutional structures, we expect each other to do very difficult things, sometimes literally impossible things, without the right gifts, without training, without resources, without the trust or respect of the wider group, and without any real backstop—a way that the Friends doing service can get help. It's no wonder so many of us burn out and leave.

In recent years, a number of Quaker groups have laid everything down and started over again. It's not a bad approach but only works if you don't rebuild with exactly the same tools again. Whether

we do a drastic overhaul or make a lot of tiny, incremental changes, I suspect the same questions will serve us well:

Can we recognize and celebrate all types of ministry, both the institutional and the non-institutional?

When we give someone a specialized task, can we pay attention to whether and how they're trained?

Can we look at resources through the lens of justice? Are we asking Friends for more time, energy, and unpaid labor than is just? Are we offering too little financial support in exchange for paid labor? Do all Friends among us have what they need? Is giving to the community a joy or a drain?

Do we trust each other and value one another's contributions?

Have we built a community in which we can all ask for help?

Do we love each other for who we are, rather than what we do?

How We Think About Money

Working internationally has taught me a lot. So much of what people assume is normal isn't "normal" at all but a cultural norm instead. It can be very difficult to recognize cultural norms because, to us, the way we think about a certain thing is *the way it is*, not the way we think about it. International work, by its nature, shows us other ways of thinking. If we can avoid the very tempting "these other people have it all wrong" mindset, we can broaden our perspective.

One cultural norm that's really surprised me is how we think about money. In the United States, where I have lived all my life, there are certain laws that govern the use of money by any non-profit organization. These laws say that if an organization accepts money for the designated purpose of purchasing Lithuanian Bibles, then the organization can only use that money to purchase Lithuanian Bibles. This ensures that the donor can, with reasonable confidence, know their money will be used for the purposes they have intended. This almost certainly encourages generosity to the organization. Without such laws, the funds given might be spent on virtually anything, including a spa trip for a board member's poodle.

Of course, the same laws sometimes cause organizations major problems, since sometimes we don't need Lithuanian Bibles as much as we did twenty years ago. What's important now is bags of dried beans for people in a region experiencing famine. But if the money came in as a designated gift, it cannot be repurposed for beans over Bibles.

The underlying cultural assumption beneath these laws is that the donor, as the person who theoretically earned (or inherited) the money, deserves to have the most influence of all parties over how the money will be spent. In other words, it's generous of me to donate at all. I should have absolute control over what my generosity buys.

There's another way of looking at such things. In some parts of the world, and among some groups, it is normal to say, "I see a person who needs money; I am in possession of money; I give the

money to the person who needs it; what could possibly be more important than the immediate need?” In this situation, the donor’s designated purpose—Lithuanian Bibles—is not ignored, but nor is it given absolute authority. Beans for the hungry matter more right now. We’ll get around to the Lithuanian Bible thing, eventually.

The underlying cultural assumption behind this perspective is that *the person in need* has the most control over where the money goes. This point of view makes a lot of room for corruption, of course. Without laws to govern the use of donated money, there’s no guarantee that the executive director isn’t buying beans at a mark-up from his brother-in-law. And my experience teaches me that often, a group that functions this way does not get around to funding the Lithuanian Bibles, which is what the donation came in to do.

But on the other hand, the need-based culture has an easier time feeding the hungry. At least in the short term. Which is when most hungry people need to eat.

When everyone connected with an organization comes from the same type of culture (donors, staff or management, and hopefully beneficiaries), either of these ways of thinking about money can mostly work. The trouble comes when some people are thinking about money one way while other people are thinking about money the other way. In those cases, because the cultures’ ways of thinking about money are often assumed rather than articulated, the result can be catastrophic misunderstanding.

Another difficulty is that the donor-preferencing culture is encoded into law in most countries. Given our history, this is not surprising. Most parts of the world have a history of colonialism, which means the laws were probably made by colonizers. Colonizers think of themselves as owning and having a right to anything they can take possession of. If they didn’t think this way, they wouldn’t be colonizing places. So to them, it’s perfectly natural to believe that resources belong to the person who earned them (or claimed them, or inherited them), and therefore, they have a right—some would say a divine right—to direct where the resources they donate go. And, over the decades and centuries, these same colonizers have naturally encoded this into law.

This means that Quaker groups in most countries, including everything from local meetings to large international institutions, are legally obliged to engage in the donor-directed way of thinking. If we accept designated donations at all, we must use the donations for the designated purposes. One effect of this among many is that we wind up, if we follow the law, reinforcing colonial ways of thinking about money in the context of cultures that don’t, themselves, think that way.

It grates against Quaker theology to say that the person with more money—the donor—gets to decide how the community as a whole will spend money. More natural would be that the community makes that decision in corporate discernment. In practice, we often try to do something in between. Many Quaker institutions, regardless of size, have used corporate discernment to set up a variety of ministries and funding streams. Donors can designate money to support a particular project or concern that’s already been approved by the community. So it’s more of a choose-your-own-adventure situation than donor-decides-all. This works about as well for Quaker groups as it does for any non-profit. Most donors like being able to support a concern that’s dear to their hearts. And most ministries get funded most of the time. But sometimes one ministry or another doesn’t get funded well enough, and if there’s

not a sufficient pot of undesignated money, we have a problem. It seems as though God has led us to establish a ministry, but then God doesn't appear to have led anyone to fund it sufficiently. What do we make of this? Can this be what's really happening?

I know of Quaker groups that have attempted to solve this by simply saying, "No designated contributions will be accepted." All gifts go into a general fund. That tends to make sure that the electrical bill gets paid, but if the institution has significant fixed expenses (like staff salaries or ongoing ministries), there still tends to be a financial shortfall sometimes.

Even within Quaker institutions with no legally designated funds, there is still a tension between need and intent. Suppose a local meeting approves an annual budget, with designated amounts to support the work of Committees A, B, and C. Six months later, Committee B discovers it needs more money to complete its work. Committee A hasn't spent any of its money at all. Who has the authority to take money from Committee A and give it to Committee B? Can the treasurer approve this? Can the clerk of Committee A? Do we need to go back and propose the change to the whole local meeting? What if Committee B's need is a legitimate emergency and cannot wait?

I don't know exactly how the earliest Friends dealt with money, but I'm quite sure they weren't marking down donor designated funds and approving budgets. They would not have had time for such things. They were busy evangelizing and being thrown into jail. But they did what they could to cover one another's expenses, when needed, and make sure that everyone had food and shelter and that everyone's children were educated. A bit later in our history, some Friends became quite wealthy. Friends established schools, universities, soup kitchens. How did we think about money then?

Quakers have never done the money thing perfectly, just as we've never done anything else perfectly. But I see three things we can learn from our history.

First, early Friends assumed we'd take responsibility for one another's basic needs. I don't make this assumption anymore. Do you? They assumed a responsibility for making sure Friends in membership had food, shelter, and education for their children—and if a Friend was in membership, it was obvious that Friend was faithfully attending worship and participating in the activities of the meeting, because they would not have accepted someone into membership that wasn't. This also implies that Friends knew one another well enough to know each other's financial situations. In many countries, Friends today have access to governmental support that our ancestors didn't—money for food, health care, shelter. But such support is often difficult to access and insufficient. Today, could we assume a responsibility for one another's basic needs, whether that means direct financial support or help in navigating governmental systems? What would that even look like?

Second, early Friends assumed we'd take responsibility for supporting ministries that the meeting affirmed. This sometimes meant the ministry of individual Friends, in which case the community might have provided money, care for farms or other property, education for children, or whatever else was necessary to release the Friend for ministry. Other times, this meant funding for outward-facing ministries such as schools, universities, feeding programs, and hospitals. What we have not always done, historically, is maintain our Spirit-led relationship with outward-facing ministries, which often leads to growing distance between Quaker meetings and our outward-facing ministry

institutions. Can we recognize financial support for ministry as essential but not sufficient, reawakening our understanding of what it means for a ministry to be “in the care of” the meeting?

Third, early Friends assumed that generosity was an essential part of Spirit-led Quaker practice. The resources we have, like the spiritual gifts we have, do not belong to us for our own use but have been given to us for the purpose of serving others. (Sometimes our resources have not been given to us at all. Sometimes our ancestors forcibly took them. Either way, it’s a step in the right direction to say these resources are not really ours.)

If what we have does not belong to us, then a donor-directed model doesn’t make sense...which doesn’t mean we will never have to engage in that way of thinking. Our entire society is permeated with an inherited colonial concept of ownership. It’s literally encoded into law. And while Friends can and do break laws when we are so called to do so by God, I doubt that will be the case most of the time.

What we can do is talk explicitly about money. We can talk about it often in our Quaker communities. We can name our concept of ownership as what it is: a cultural norm that now permeates most societies, but not the “right” or the only way to think about money. We can try to discover a modern Quaker theology of money, which I don’t believe we have right now, and we can design institutions that support it. I suspect such an institution would encourage money to flow toward what God is asking of us rather than becoming trapped in human dams and channels.

I cannot describe exactly what such an institution would look like. I think we’d have to invent it, through experimentation and lots of tiny choices. The bigger question might be, do we intend to make sure that our institutions support the manner in which God asks us to engage with money, or will we allow our institutional structures—which are embedded in laws and norms drawn from a specific type of culture—to guide our way forward instead?

Where is the Library?

The Baptist across the table was staring. “I don’t understand how you function at all.” She meant Quakers in general, not me personally. “I mean, obviously you do. But...I mean...”

I was not offended. It does seem miraculous, sometimes, that we Quakers manage to do anything. We’re constantly going back to corporate discernment, which can go astray in so many ways. There’s no centralized institutional authority. We have no single understanding of how we do things.

There are, of course, strengths to Quaker ways. They teach discipline and commitment and patience and deep listening. They discourage dismissiveness and dehumanization. Most importantly, perhaps, they are the way in which we believe God has called us to operate. They aren’t the only ways to be faithful, but they are the ways in which God has asked our particular group of humans to function.

And, of course, Quaker ways have weaknesses. I recently had occasion to try to show with my hands how Quaker covenant communities are meant to relate. “It’s not a chain,” I said, placing my fists one on top of the other. “Not local meeting, then regional meeting, then yearly meeting, then umbrella organization. It’s a web of connections, in which local meetings are webbed with other local meetings in

their regions, and regional meetings are webbed with other regional meetings in their yearly meetings, and so on.” I didn’t have nearly enough hands to demonstrate.

The benefit of webbed relationships is that inspiration and energy and discernment can crawl in multiple directions across the web. Ideally, they don’t just go up and down the chain. Connections can be made in nearly infinite places. Inspiration and energy and ministries can come from anywhere. It’s exciting and empowering.

But it doesn’t have a search engine.

This is actually a really hard problem. Time and time again, I’ve witnessed Friends trying to assemble something like a centralized library of resources. I understand the impetus. We know how much goodness is available in the Quaker world. We know that somewhere in the Religious Society of Friends there is someone who has solved whatever puzzle we’re facing, someone who might come and walk alongside us. Help is available, but finding it is too hard. So we try to make a list of ministers and ministries, a database of websites, something, anything, to stop Friends in local meetings from constantly trying to reinvent the wheel.

But the list or the database doesn’t seem to work. How do we know who we include on the list as trustworthy and who we don’t? We know full well that some Friends’ ministries will speak to some meetings and not to others because of the theological and cultural differences, but how do we write that down in a way that’s fully true but isn’t offensive? Speaking of theological and cultural differences, doesn’t which institution is compiling the database send a signal all by itself about who it’s for? And then there’s the fact that it all changes so fast. To give an imaginary example: Agatha used to have a ministry about addiction and community, but she has laid that down now, or perhaps she’s had a stroke, or maybe she’s passed along her work to Roberto, who is twenty years younger. How does the resource library get updated when the person running the website probably hasn’t ever spoken to Agatha?

The decentralized Quaker network changes lightning fast. Without a central authority responsible for approving (or not approving) the ministries, workshops, websites, books, informal conversations, and Spirit-led art that lines our web, there’s no methodical way to track what’s out there.

The way our institutional systems function, the burden of finding and accessing help often falls on individuals in local meetings. A Friend in Virginia can know it’s very likely that someone, somewhere, has wisdom to share about supporting autistic Friends, but how to find that person? A Friend in Mexico may know that surely someone, somewhere, has written a Bible study in Spanish about the Pauline epistles, but where to look?

I can say from experience that finding such resources means accessing multiple institutional websites, which means you first have to know the names of all the different institutions (and access to the Internet and the ability to use it). You also have to know what various Quaker institutions do and what their general theological and cultural approach is—information often not available in writing. And likely as not, you also have to know a bunch of people, because a lot Quaker resources aren’t on institutional websites but stored on a shelf behind the flour in somebody’s kitchen (sometimes metaphorically, but sometimes literally). You have to know people who know people who know people. It takes years to build such relationships, and it’s not reasonable or possible for most Quakers to do this.

We do have a library. Like everything else among Friends, it is decentralized and embedded in people. I know because I carry part of it. The course of a normal week includes helping Friends from wherever to connect to resources they don't know about. Yes, I do know somebody who has knowledge about X, or Y, or Z. Or if I don't—and sometimes I don't—I probably know somebody who knows somebody. There is a constant buzz of reaching out along the web, of Friends asking Friends who know Friends who know Friends.

Like anything else that relies on human networks, this decentralized Quaker resource library is vulnerable to only lifting up the in-club. This is something of which we can be aware. I don't think we can fix it, though, by trying to take the library out of the humans and put it in some central location. That's not how Quakers function, which is why attempts to centralize our resource database tend to fail. However, any of us who are in a position to do so can pay attention to who gets our attention, and both individuals and institutions can try to compensate by creating welcoming spaces, by nurturing ministries, and by establishing strong communications channels.

Most importantly, I think we can help address the in-club issue by being honest and transparent: resources in the Quaker world are usually communicated through people who know people who know people. That's true whether we name it or not, so let's name it and work to make the human network better.

The Role of Religious Education

Quakerism is an experiential faith. We learn it in our hearts and our bodies. It gets inside us and changes us. In some ways, it's like becoming an expert in tennis or oil painting or ballet. We follow the same practices, day by day, week by week, and year by year, until certain motions (external and internal) become innate to the humans we are.

Because this is true, because the experiential nature of our practice is so central, we might think experience is all that is needed, and sometimes experience is all we provide. But there are certain elements of Quakerism that aren't obvious if nobody tells you, things you won't grasp without conversations or videos or books, things that can be forgotten even if we did learn them in the first place, things that are so easily misunderstood, things that we communicate through religious education.

In some parts of the Quaker world, religious education has fallen out of fashion. We may or may not provide it for the meeting's children. We are even less likely to provide it for adults. When we do, it's sometimes watered down, or we pretend there is no such thing as *what Quakerism says*, that every perspective is equally Quaker...which isn't the case. Quakerism isn't a free-for-all.

That doesn't mean that Quakerism has the only set of correct ideas. In fact, believing that is downright dangerous. But we do have particular concepts that our spiritual ancestors have learned over time. They are at the heart of how we exist in community, and when they're not understood, things go awry.

Religious education can happen in many ways, but it's vital that it does happen, that seekers are not left anchorless to struggle and piece things together as best they can. Whether it's formal classes,

facilitated conversations, one-on-one relationships, texts to read, or podcasts to listen to, newcomers need some kind of guide to the basics. Without a common understanding of these, we are severely limited in who we can be.

What's Happening in Worship

When I was still a fairly new Friend, I had a houseguest who came to worship with me. Afterward she said, “That’s all quite beautiful. I think I would like to do it again sometime. I like group meditation. Which is—I mean, that’s essentially what you’re doing.”

I had a sense that something was wrong with this statement, but I could not articulate why. Today, I understand the problem. Group meditation is a beautiful thing, but it differs from Quaker worship significantly. Quaker worship occurs with the expectation of guidance from the Divine. We believe that God can and does speak. We wait for the voice of Spirit, which might come through any person present, to offer us instruction and, sometimes, revelation. This is profound. We are not only stilling our minds and bodies; we are anticipating the presence of God, who teaches us directly, individually and as communities.

This is equally true in unprogrammed and programmed meetings. In a programmed meeting, we anticipate hearing from God through music, Scripture, messages. In an unprogrammed meeting, we anticipate hearing from God in silence. But to the outsider, unprogrammed meetings easily look like group meditation, and programmed meetings easily look like ritual practices—neither of which is bad, but also, neither of which is what we are doing.

The essential teaching here is that when we listen, revelation can and does come from God. Without this collective understanding, we lose our ability to be led by Spirit and lean instead on either our own best ideas or “the way things are done.” Neither of those is sufficient for the world in which we live.

What Corporate Discernment Is

My same houseguest asked about business meeting. “Is it really true that if one person doesn’t think something should be done, it won’t be?” I told her yes. “That’s beautiful, too.”

And technically true, but incomplete. Corporate discernment looks a lot like coming to unanimous agreement: I say what I think is best, you say what you think is best, a third person says what they think is best, and we all come out somewhere in the middle. The actual nature of corporate discernment is something else. It builds on the understanding of what is happening in worship, that we can and will be led by the Divine, and it adds an element of mutual humility. We know that no one hears perfectly from God. Our fears, our preconceptions, and our egos get in the way. So we test things with each other. We do our best to speak Spirit-led truth. But we are not sure. We can only try to articulate our best listening. And then we trust the community’s discernment over our own.

If we think we’re finding unanimous agreement about what’s best, then we expect mutual compromise. We also expect a right to stand in the way if we don’t like how things are going. And we don’t realize that listening for God’s guidance, as uncovered by the community as a whole, is the basic

motion. We will never hear the sense of the meeting if we don't know what that means and why it matters. This limits the community's ability to discern.

Living in the Virtue of That Life and Power That Takes Away the Occasion of All Wars

Friends are known widely as pacifists. The word may be inadequate. Rather, we believe it is possible to “live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars.” It is the difference between refusing to engage in violence and leaning toward a world with no cause for violence. Simple pacifism says that we will not do harm, and it carries with it all sorts of questions about privilege and intervention. In a violent world, to refuse to do violence sometimes means allowing violence to be done. It means not raising arms even to protect the innocent.

To “live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars”...well, that's a totally different thing. It suggests that it's possible never to need violence, that in the power of God, it's possible never to get to that point, that there is always another way to exist together. We can't always see or find that way by ourselves, but if we live in alignment with the leadings of Spirit—presumably in community, since that's how we listen best—we will be shown the way.

Equating the peace testimony with pacifism lets us off the hook. It leads us to conflict avoidance within our communities, which allows the powerful to harm the less powerful. And it means that refusing to fight, and disapproving of other people fighting, is sufficient to be faithful to our peace testimony. This is a good start, but the actual words that first articulated that testimony imply considerably more. They imply that listening to Spirit's leadings will stop violence before it starts, both in our own hearts and in the world generally, presumably by addressing injustice and inequity and poverty and abuse of power. To live in accordance with the peace testimony means to expect we'll be called into bold action, internally and externally, toward justice, mercy, and reconciliation.

Spiritual Transformation

We are flawed. Some blame this on human nature, others on original sin. Some say we are the product of imperfect environments. What our Quaker ancestors learned experimentally is that we have hope. We can be changed. As we listen to God, discern in community, and attempt to live “in the virtue of that life and power,” we are transformed. Friends' testimonies, such as integrity or simplicity or stewardship, are not something to which to strive. They are ways in which we find ourselves living when we consistently practice deep, expectant listening.

If we, ourselves, are flawed, and if we, ourselves, can be transformed, then so, too, are others flawed, and so, too, can others be transformed. Even people who are cruel or violent or deliberately ignorant have the potential to be something entirely different. We needn't give up on anyone. On the other hand, if we believe a person's nature is essentially unchangeable, or if we believe there is only hope if we humans can convince someone to change, then we might be tempted to consider someone unsalvageable. We might be tempted to reject whole categories of people. We might even be tempted to lose hope for ourselves: I am who I am, and I cannot change.

Spiritual transformation is not an easy or a painless process. It helps, somewhat, to know what it is before we experience it, as understanding makes it slightly less frightening. It is also good to know it

can happen more than once. We can be transformed many times in our lifetimes, any time God has something new for us.

In essence: all people are flawed, and all people have the potential for transformation—but transformation comes from God, not from ourselves or from other people. This fundamental approach to humanity can change our view of every relationship we have.

The Kingdom of God on Earth is Possible Now

In Christianity, there is a theological difference between sects that believe the Kingdom of God on Earth can exist now and sects that believe we must wait for the Second Coming. The latter says that no matter what we do, the Earth and its people will remain deeply flawed until the end of the world and the intervention of Jesus. Quakerism says the opposite: an abundant, just, and peaceable kingdom can exist in our world right now...if we listen, discern, live in the power of God, and open ourselves to transformation.

It's a hopeful vision but can also be a scary one. It's scary especially if we interpret this as saying that we ourselves can establish the kingdom of God on Earth. We cannot. We are inadequate to the task. But God can. If we're open to God's leadings, we may be called into unimaginable things—that is, things we ourselves would not have imagined doing. In Quaker practice, this belief is the difference between opening to the power of God and trying, unassisted, to think up good ideas.

In any conversation about Quaker institutions, it's essential to embed our work in Quaker theology. This particular worldview is the one we've been given, and it informs everything, including the very practical ways in which we function together. Religious education must come first so that we understand how to find way forward—and what our intended destination might be.

Cultural Diversity

Some kinds of cultural diversity are obvious, and really big differences often feel exciting. When we hold large gatherings and need interpreters, or when we assemble with Friends who worship very differently, or when we see people in clothing we've previously only seen on TV, many of us find that interesting. We feel as though we're doing a Big Thing.

Truth told, though, many of our yearly meetings have considerable cultural diversity even when interpreters and various forms of worship aren't required, and those are the types of cultural diversity that Friends seem to find much harder to navigate. Aside from cultural practices related to class, race, and nationality, there's also an urban/rural divide. In parts of the world where yearly meetings overlap geographically, it's pretty common for most urban or college town meetings to fall into one yearly meeting while most rural meetings fall into another. In parts of the world where there's no choice available, it's often the case that one group dominates the yearly meeting gatherings while the other group or groups feel distant and alienated.

If we're looking at a group of people in which all participants speak the same language, sleep in the same types of beds, and wear at least roughly similar clothing, what cultural differences could be so significant?

Food is a big one, in terms of both habits and morality. There are Friends with Spirit-led practices of veganism or vegetarianism and Friends with dietary restrictions that are necessary to their health. There are other Friends for whom a meal is not a meal unless it includes meat and potatoes. It's really difficult for a vegan Friend to join a gathering in which there is no food they can eat. Aside from the resulting physical hunger, there's a spiritual left-out-ness that's alienating. Unfortunately, the reverse is also true. There's nothing like spending two hours baking your grandmother's recipe of chocolate chip cookies and being told when you walk in the door at the potluck, "No thanks, nobody here eats carbs." I've been to Quaker gatherings in which all food provided is vegan and gluten-free, under the theory that this means everyone can eat everything. That might be technically and nutritionally accurate, but it isn't so culturally. It sends a signal about who this gathering is for. The best solution I can think of is judicious use of labels: have a little bit of everything, and make it clear what's what.

Language is another cultural separator, even if we all speak the same language from the dictionary's point of view. Cultural groups use different idioms and slang. Organizations use specialized jargon that some may understand and others not. More subtly, there are differences about how many words are used, and when, and how. Some of us come from cultures that lean heavily into words. (That includes me.) What we say very closely resembles what we mean, and we don't hesitate very much to say it. Other cultures are less likely to articulate things. What will happen next is based more on body language and what isn't said and underlying commonly shared assumptions. It's absolutely possible that a group will state verbally that the meetinghouse will be painted and then it's never painted, and this surprises no one, because the undertone of the conversation indicated that it would not be. Erin Meyer refers to this phenomenon as the difference between low-context and high-context cultures, and the only way to navigate it is to understand and name it, to literally request that those who disagree please say so, to slow down and give more time for the unspoken to rise.

There are also differences in how we use language to communicate. In my part of the world, Quakerism is heavy on verbal communication, both in speaking and in writing. I remember once making a sixty-second video to introduce a project. I chose that approach because the project had to do with use of video and social media. One Friend wrote me a two-page email explaining why it was unacceptable for me to expect Friends to take sixty seconds to watch a video. He was reinforcing a culture that privileges word-only communications—a culture in which he, himself, is most comfortable.

Cultures also differ in how they engage with conflict. Some tend to avoid it, or if that's not possible, postpone it, to deal with the conflict at the "appropriate time." This is baffling to those who come from cultures that deal with conflict in the moment it rises, either implicitly (using subtle words or body language to deal with the disagreement) or explicitly (with obvious argument that can feel jarring to those not expecting it). It's the difference between those who believe conflict and hard feelings should be worked out behind closed doors and those who believe there is no such thing as a more appropriate time than the one in which the conflict arises. Aside from *when* we deal with conflict, we also have to think about how. Calmly, laying aside or downplaying our feelings? Open-heartedly, which might mean tears or shouting? With humor or sarcasm, so we can laugh while solving the problem?

Bizarrely, even making decisions about how the community will set its norms is, in itself, a cultural norm. Some groups come to agreements ahead of time about conduct; others assume people will know how to behave and, if there are problems, deal with them in the moment, often using humor.

Another cultural difference is tone, both the tone of individuals and the tone of the gathering. How much emotion should we use in our voices? How much should our bodies be moving? How quickly do we talk, or how slowly? How much ambient noise is desirable? Are we crowded together or spaced apart? Do we expect things to start on time? Is the meeting more important or the conversations that happen in the hallways?

And lastly, there's the political/social baseline, the ideas about which we assume everyone agrees. What is "obviously true" or "obviously right" in one culture is not so obvious in another. This is tricky because there are moral issues involved, and sometimes moral issues are inseparable from political/social ones. Other times, they seem inseparable, but upon a little extra investigation and deep listening, they're not. The better we do with engaging across cultures generally, the more likely we are to make fewer assumptions about what's "obvious," simply because we'll be exposed to more ideas.

Why does all this matter so much? Is considering cultural diversity a matter of inclusion? Yes, but it's not only about inclusion. As I said in my second paragraph, most Quaker yearly meetings contain considerable cultural diversity. Fewer local meetings do, or at least not to the same extent, but the basic ideas are also relevant there. In either case, when we start perpetuating a particular set of cultural norms, we're unintentionally sending signals about what sort of person a community is for. Friends know that if we create a community that is more welcoming to one sort of person than another, we are losing some of what makes corporate discernment so powerful. We're losing that of God in whole groups of people who step away from the community because we're sending signals—even if unintentionally—that this community is only for certain types of people.

In regional meetings, yearly meetings, and umbrella organizations, establishing a set of cultural norms that lines up with one cultural group and not another can easily alienate the less-aligned group. It's a fairly common story. Friends from certain meetings don't show up to the larger-group gatherings. We read the names of the meetings at roll call, but nobody's ever actually there. The larger group makes decisions without them, and the cultural norms of the larger group become more deeply entrenched and even farther away from the Friends who aren't present. And then we wonder why it is that some Friends feel the larger group isn't for them or isn't relevant to them.

Pushing against these patterns is a challenge. One thing that everybody can do is simply pay attention to cultural norms. We can notice that what feels "right" to us as individuals is very often a reflection of culture. We can make little choices to disrupt narrow cultural norms, like more variety in what's for dinner and trying different types of music or shifting around the schedules. We can make space for various types of contributions and communications, not only explicitly word-oriented ones. We can also make a practice of asking ourselves, when something happens that feels wrong or disruptive to us, "Why does this make me feel this way? Is it causing legitimate harm, or is it bothering me because it's not in keeping with my expectations?"

In a larger-scale sense, institutions can pay attention to who has power and influence and try to share this influence with people coming from less-dominant cultures. This is tricky because Friends from less-dominant cultures are less likely to be present at our large group gatherings and less likely to have experience with the institutions simply because we have, historically, made such Friends feel less welcome. If this weren't a self-reinforcing problem, it would be much easier to solve. But if we're going to hold together as a covenant community, that community will have to feel as though it's "for" everyone who's part of it.

The Role of the Ancestors

The thing about a covenant community is, I'm not sure it stops at death. I have no evidence for this beyond a feeling. I just cannot imagine that, if we are given to a community by God, and if we are meant to love that community and work with that community and engage in corporate discernment with that community, that it wouldn't be an eternal relationship.

If that's true—and assume with me for a moment that it is—then how do the dead contribute to our community? What is the role of the dead in discernment? It can only be our traditions. Friends believe in continuing revelation, but we don't start from scratch every time we ask a question. We have decades, or centuries, or millennia of tradition, depending on how you define the start. Our spiritual ancestors were imperfect, as are we, but the traditions they've passed on are the echoes of their best discernment, and these traditions are their voices speaking into the present.

It's why it's so important to have at least some level of familiarity with our history. If we're ignoring it or misinterpreting it, the ancestors cannot speak up in the moment and say so. To discard our spiritual ancestors' writings, practices, and traditions without thoroughly examining them is to toss away—deliberately—the contributions to our discernment coming from many thousands of Friends.

Of course, it's also wrong to discern way forward relying entirely on tradition, because our condition now is something that Friends who came us before didn't know. The world has changed. We have changed. It's possible God's calling for us has changed. And so, when we practice corporate discernment, we take the contributions of the ancestors and hold them in the Light alongside our own. And then we find the sense of the meeting.

I wonder, too, if our spiritual ancestors have a voice in corporate discernment, is there a place for the voice of our spiritual descendants? For the generations yet to come? If so, I suspect that voice can be heard in a call to adventurous stewardship.

The "stewardship" part is probably obvious. It's akin to what we've all heard so many times, about considering the impact of our actions on the seventh generation, a concept articulated by the Haudenosaunee people. This resonates in the context of natural resources and creation, but I think right stewardship might look a bit different when we're talking about money and property and human energy.

Sometimes, we Friends interpret a call to stewardship as a call to extreme caution, even stinginess, an unwillingness to use what financial and property resources we have, or to experiment with new institutional structures and practices, because we feel obliged to preserve our exact assets for future

generations. This is why I say “adventurous stewardship,” more like what we learn from the parable of the talents. We’re called to use what we have for God’s purposes, even when this involves some risk, if not for our sakes then for the benefit of the future generations. What would they hope to inherit? Maybe, more importantly than a well-padded bank account, a community well-practiced in following the callings of God adventurously.

Our Quaker institutions are intended to support our ability to discern and act upon God’s purposes. When we look at what that means, we’re not limited to our condition right now. We’re holding the whole scope of the covenant community, from our ancestors down through our descendants. It seems obvious to me, then, that our institutions will always be changing, as the condition of the covenant community will always change. We will always be holding the past. We will always be stretching toward the future.

It can feel like a lot, this idea of trying to remember both the ancestors and the descendants in discernment. I wonder if it’s easier to think of them as extra voices in the room. They’re not demanding things of us; they are simply adding their voices to our discernment, and we listen because they are part of our people.

Corporate Discernment and Nonprofit Law

One summer, I found myself working with a group of Friends who were considering restructuring their nonprofit status and their trustees. They were a collection of Quaker groups, all separately incorporated, and all with separate groups of trustees—about eight or nine different groups. Thing was, they were in a relatively small geographic area, and most of them were having a hard time finding enough Friends to serve in these positions.

The groups themselves were not thinking of merging. They wanted to continue their worship as separate groups. They wanted to continue their corporate discernment separately. The question was whether they could combine trustees and have just one set for all of them, as a strategy for saving time and energy.

Nonprofit law is not my area of expertise, but fortunately, it wasn’t legal matters that were tripping up this discernment process. It actually wasn’t clear what was making it difficult. The best information I could get ahead of time was, “Various groups of Friends are resisting this for various reasons, while others feel sure it is a good and practical idea.” I’m not criticizing the working group with which I was communicating. They had lots to tell me about all kinds of conversations they’d had, both structured and unstructured, including a lot of time spent in worship. It just wasn’t clear what the fundamental problem was.

Seventeen Friends joined the day-long session that I was facilitating. I led them through a variety of exercises, but honestly, I was feeling around in the dark. Three hours in, the penny dropped. *They didn’t have a common definition of the role of trustees.* Their definitions didn’t even come close, and this was the working group at the center of the discernment process. How much more confusion must there be in all the meetings they were trying to align?

Nearly a year later, I facilitated a Zoom consultation called “The Role of Trustees.” This time, we were talking about trusteeship in relation to the life cycle of meetings. It was a perfectly fine conversation, but I discovered as we went along that many of the Friends who showed up were looking primarily for some form of training. “Nobody ever explained to me what I’m supposed to do as a trustee.” In fact, at least one Friend bravely raised her hand to say, “I really don’t know at all what the word ‘trustee’ means.”

So. Let’s define it.

Trustee (noun) – a Friend who has legal responsibility for the rightful use of the assets of a Quaker organization, according to the laws of their nation and/or area. The legal responsibility is usually communal: that is, the trustee does not have sole personal responsibility, but the trustees collectively have responsibility. The legal responsibility is that the organization’s assets be used in the best interests of the organization and/or as intended by donors, or—if the organization is legally dissolved—that the assets are disposed of in keeping with the law.

I started this essay with stories, not with a definition, because I know the definition puts some people to sleep. For many of us, it doesn’t resonate with Quakerism, nor does it seem to have any relationship with living an adventurous spiritual life. But Friends’ lack of understanding of this concept, and our hesitance to talk about it, is at the root of many conflicts. I’ve seen it all but destroy a meeting.

Left to our own devices, Quakers probably wouldn’t have trustees. The existence and role of trustees sits uneasily with our central concept of corporate discernment. Trustees have a legal responsibility for the meeting’s assets, including its finances and its property. But Friends generally make decisions through corporate discernment, waiting on guidance from the Spirit of the Lord and testing that guidance with the community as a whole. If we don’t get specific about our definition of trusteeship and how it’s going to work, then Friends who are serving as trustees are given legal responsibility for something over which they have no clear authority.

It’s an awful position to put anybody in.

As far as I can tell, if your Quaker institution is legally incorporated as a nonprofit, then you have to have some kind of trustees. I don’t know of any nation in which this is untrue. It’s a fairly sensible arrangement from the government’s point of view. Someone has to be legally responsible for making sure that no one absconds with the nonprofit’s assets. Friends would counter that we’re *all* responsible, but governments don’t like concepts that can’t be written down with specific names on pieces of paper.

So we have trustees. Some meetings call them trustees, some don’t. Some meetings know exactly who their trustees are. Other meetings wrote names down decades ago and then did their best to pretend it never happened, which probably means they’re in a legal mess if the meeting ever experiences unexpected catastrophe. In contrast, other local meetings really don’t have trustees. They may not need them, depending on their legal status, but if they don’t have them, their regional or yearly meetings probably do. Sometimes there are trustees at the local, regional, *and* yearly meeting levels because these groups are all incorporated separately. I’ve heard of local meetings with multiple sets of trustees because

they own multiple nonprofit corporations. In other words, there are lots of ways to go about this trustee business.

(Please don't read anything I'm saying as legal advice. The primary advice I'm giving from that point of view is that we should all make sure that what we're doing is legal.)

The point I really want to make, though, is one step beyond the legal one. It's the question about the relationship between the trustees and the corporate discernment of the whole. When conflict erupts over the use of a Quaker institution's assets, it very often starts with a disagreement about the role of trustees.

Let's look at some of the ways in which this relationship can be approached.

Some meetings give their trustees absolutely no decision-making power. All decisions regarding the assets are made in corporate discernment as a meeting. Certain committees might make recommendations (like property committees or budget committees), or committee members might even be delegated certain responsibilities. But the trustees exist for legal purposes only and make no decisions. They're called upon only to do things like sign documents.

There are meetings for which this approach works well. We're able to maintain a sort of ideological purity about discernment, and if the meeting's assets are simple or minimal and nobody's challenging them, there's probably no need for the decision-making body to have any particular expertise.

But there are a couple of problems with this approach. One problem is that it's possible to forget who the trustees are, and sometimes they die or move away but are still the legal trustees. This can lead to an impossible situation if the meetinghouse needs to be sold or the meeting laid down or restructured. The other problem (which I've already mentioned) is that it leaves certain Friends legally responsible for something over which they have no authority. That's an incredibly vulnerable position to be in, because as far as the government is concerned, they *do* have authority and can be held accountable for the meeting's decisions. The situation isn't terribly likely to go wrong, but if it did, it could go wrong rather dramatically.

Another way forward, the opposite of the first, is giving the trustees *all* decision-making power when it comes to the use and preservation of the meeting's assets. Trustees decide who can use the property, and when, and for what, and under which regulations. Trustees decide how the funds will be invested. Trustees release money to be spent by the meeting (and designate how much may be used, sometimes also with restrictions on purpose). Trustees hire property managers and set up maintenance schedules and have the final say over renovations or sales.

Friends who have not existed in Quaker institutions that operate this way often can't imagine finding it acceptable. But oddly, Friends who have always known trustees that function this way may not find it troubling at all. It has to do with how we think about it. Are we abdicating our responsibility for good stewardship? Or are we delegating it to people we know can do it well? Giving trustees total authority over the assets means that the rest of the group doesn't have to spend time worrying about such things. Also, if the trustees are well trained, the work is done more efficiently than it otherwise could be. And if the trustees are spiritually grounded, which they often are, it's also done in a deeply faithful way.

The drawbacks mostly have to do with distance. The trustees can begin to feel like a subgroup, appearing secretive and closed-off even if they don't intend to be. They can find themselves working long hours on concerns that other Friends aren't fully conscious of. And those who *aren't* trustees are missing out on something. There's a spiritual discipline in practicing stewardship as a faith community, and we don't have a chance to grow in our abilities if we delegate the conversations entirely.

The most common arrangement among Friends is also the trickiest. Trustees are given authority to make certain asset-related decisions independently, but in other circumstances, the group as a whole does asset-related corporate discernment. In many ways, this in-between state makes the most sense. If the institution's assets are at all complicated, it can be prohibitively difficult to make every decision as a whole. But no matter what the law of the land says, many Friends feel uneasy with centralizing power by delegating all asset decisions to a small group. So we try to find a middle road between these.

For Friends' institutions operating this way, I strongly recommend an annual conversation in which you all talk about who makes which decisions and why. This might sound like a good way to start arguments (and it probably is), but it's better than operating in opacity, with each Friend making assumptions that are never discussed. Time and again, this leads to misunderstandings, in which one group of Friends feels betrayed by another, or in which Friends experience a sense of mutual betrayal. It's hard to remain spiritually centered about money and property in the best of circumstances. It's much harder when we find ourselves dividing into teams based on historical misunderstandings that no one wanted to explore or articulate.

We are stuck with the existence of trusteeship. This legal construct is part of the world we live in, and if we want nonprofit status (which most of us do, for various good reasons), then we have to operate in accordance with the law. The question, then, is how God asks us to engage with this reality. I suspect the answer is "as openly as possible, respecting our trustees enough to both train them and trust them, with clarity about relationships and respectful questioning when any of us are confused."

What Money Can Do

I'm not sure exactly how many times the Bible mentions money. One source I came across counts 2,350 references, compared to only 500 about faith or prayer. A fair number of folks have written articles online about this, and the basic message is, "If God has 2,350 things to say about money, then He must consider money important." And then the author explains exactly how God wants us to spend it.

I'm not nearly as sure what God's message is. For one thing, I don't think that money appears in the Bible over two thousand times because God thinks it's important. I think it appears in the Bible over two thousand times because *it is* important, because even in the days when the Bible was being written, money and other material resources determined everything from social status to political power to whether a person could eat.

Money makes things possible that otherwise wouldn't be. And the justifiable fear brought about by its absence—or by the anticipation of its future absence—makes things a lot harder than they ought to be.

Friends don't talk a lot about money, for all that we like to sit and fret in budget meetings. We talk about not having it, we talk about needing to raise it, we talk about whether we should use it or give it or save it, but we don't talk much about *it*. What's the purpose of money? Is it meant to keep us safe in times of crisis? Is it meant to empower us and others in ministry? Should it be used as leverage, where it can do the most good for the most people, or should it be used as first aid, given freely to the person with the most urgent need? Is possession of money meant to make us comfortable or uncomfortable?

It seems as though having money should be a good thing. A well funded Quaker community could be providing for the material needs of its members, releasing ministry, maintaining its property, and donating to neighborhood organizations. Right? But some of the wealthiest Quaker institutions are run by Quaker communities in deep conflict. What, exactly, is the definition of "enough"? How do we choose between this good cause and that one? If we say yes to one proposal, don't we have to say yes to all the others? Better to say no universally. The truth is, having money can bind us, can actually prevent us from living into God's will if our fear of losing what we have consumes us.

What else does money do?

Money, and the fear of losing it, can exert a powerful effect on individuals. Quaker staff members know that they are paid to do particular work, and they know that these jobs can be taken away. Those of us whose ministries are supported by donations are acutely aware that speaking on certain hot-button issues might threaten our livelihood. Ministers of all kinds, including released ministers we've designated as staff, *should* be held accountable to community discernment. But an unspoken threat to income is a harsh way of doing it. Not that anyone is doing that intentionally—we're not—but it's nevertheless a real phenomenon that has developed because we don't pay attention to how we do funding and accountability.

Friends collectively haven't really reconsidered how we fund ministry since the 1800s, when most Friends were expected to practice tentmaking—that is, having a business of some kind separate from one's ministry that provides financial support. But in the 1800s, we were a semi-closed economic community that could generally count on one another's patronage for our goods and services, which is no longer the case. We also cared for Friends' farms or businesses or even families while they engaged in ministry in order to bridge any gap, and that too is a practice we've lost over time. But we haven't developed a new approach with specific intention, so financial release of ministry happens messily if at all.

What else does money do?

Most Quaker organizations have a practice of approving their budgets in community discernment. But doing this in a manner that is legitimately Spirit-led requires extraordinary discipline that many groups don't have. Think about what we are asking of ourselves in that process.

First, we must come to a sense of the meeting about what should be supported out of literally every possibility in the world: does our money pay for basic needs, and if so, whose? Or for our

communal spiritual practices, and if so, what counts as part of this category? Or for community-building, and if so, what community and how? Or for activism, and if so, through which practices or organizations? Because all of these things are virtuous, and because we as individuals are each led differently, we tend to support things out of inertia more than leading. Once something has appeared in the budget once, it stays.

Second, since we don't know how to cut things or start the budget from scratch, but since there is a genuine arithmetic limit to how much money we have, we start weighing priorities against each other and whittling the numbers down. This tends to lead to bad feelings, and often, the actual dollar amount going to any particular thing is insufficient—and yet still, when we add up the lines, we have a shortfall.

That shortfall divides us yet again, usually between Friends who feel it's wrong to spend more than we bring in and Friends who feel it's wrong *not* to spend on things that are important (even if that means dipping into savings or going into debt) and Friends whose gift of faith tells them everything will turn out okay.

We're frozen because we've missed the first step: letting God lead us in what we do, each submitting to the sense of the meeting, even if that means our own most beloved thing doesn't get funded.

What else does money do?

Sometimes, money can release spiritual energy by taking care of work so that the rest of us can shift our focus. For example, if we've been fretting and fussing and exhausting ourselves over who's going to shovel the meetinghouse sidewalk, then paying someone to take on that task can give the rest of us space to engage in work we're more authentically led to do.

Other times, money can keep us safe. We can take the concept of savings too far, becoming unable to spend because we're so afraid of not having enough, but having a certain amount tucked away can protect us from economic swings or unexpected crises.

Money can tempt us beyond caution to corruption. If the institution has money and an individual has access to it, sometimes that individual will steal. This happens more often than most Friends probably realize, because when it happens, we often try to keep it quiet.

Money says who can participate and who can't. When we choose to do something that costs individual participants money, like summer camps or gatherings or sessions or youth weekends, we are drawing a line between who can participate and who can't. And then, because we want the thing to be accessible, we find ways to *allow* Friends who can't contribute the designated number to get help. This always sets up a power inequity and is often very hard on the Friends with less money.

Which is not to say it's easy to be the wealthiest. Friends with a lot of financial resources often say that they feel judged by others simply for *having* money...that they are called greedy and immoral and classist, either directly or in the abstract by general statements about "rich people." But they're also approached, constantly, with requests for financial support for Friends' projects.

I was in the room once when a group was trying to decide whether it could accept a \$10,000 donation in support of a proposed project. One Friend said, "We cannot take on this project. We can't

take it on *because* someone has offered to support it. Because that would be letting the wealthy person direct what we do, and that's unacceptable." I see their point. And also, it was a project worth doing.

What does money do best and most consistently?

As a child, I loved to play with a magnifying glass, to see all the details of a bug or a leaf or a crack in the sidewalk, to make visible what had always been present but unseen. I think that's what money does. Whatever exists already, money (or its absence) will make it bigger. It will show us the differences between us, our conflicts, our fears, our flaws. But it can also bless and magnify good things, by making possible what wasn't before.

What can we do differently?

Let's start by really talking about money. Not in the moment when we're trying to approve the budget, but always. We can use guides like this one from Everence to support this kind of conversation. Each of us thinks of money differently, and we won't know or understand that about each other until we've said it out loud. Most of us live in cultures that teach us not to talk about money...because it's impolite or might make us feel bad. But I think the consequences of *not* discussing it are a lot more severe.

It also might be time to start talking about whether Friends are still responsible for one another's most basic needs. We used to assume that every Quaker would have food, clothing, decent shelter, and education for their children, and if they didn't, the rest of us would step in. Today, some of our meetings have no mechanism for assistance, and others have it but keep it quiet, presumably for the sake of confidentiality. Our younger Friends regularly contribute to things like GoFundMe campaigns for individual medical care. On the one hand, it's horrific that we live in a world where this is necessary—but on the other hand, that *is* the world we live in, so what can we learn from a GoFundMe kind of model? What can we learn from mutual aid societies?

We can also have a real conversation about how ministry works today. This isn't a side conversation or a special interest. Most of what Friends do is done by individual or institutional ministries, whether we name them as ministries or not. Are staff members still released ministers? What do we mean by that? What about non-institutional ministry? Do we believe in it, and do we support it, and what does supporting it actually mean? What does it mean for an individual or institutional ministry to be "under the care of the meeting"? This conversation is happening a lot in small circles but not at all in most wider ones.

We might also approve priorities, not budgets, in the context of large groups, certainly any group that's larger than a local meeting. Those priorities would have to be specific, not wishy-washy statements that could be stretched to include anything. We'd need a more concrete system than sitting in worship listening to one another's words—although we should definitely include sitting in worship and listening to one another's words—because priorities can be complicated, and we simply can't hold all the pieces in our heads simultaneously. But there are processes that *can* support this kind of discernment. They usually involve sticky notes or other visual aids. And once the priorities are affirmed, a small group could do the work of aligning the budget—with the sense of the meeting stating ahead of time that things lower on the list may not receive funding.

Pay-as-led is a powerful system for funding large gatherings and has spread from New England Yearly Meeting to many other places. But I, and many others, persist in wondering whether we need so many large-scale gatherings that really seem to benefit only those who attend. Community-building matters, but could it happen differently? What happens if we combine in-home hospitality gatherings and smaller day-long gatherings and online gatherings? What if we simply stop having six-figure budgets (and yes, some of them are six figures, or even seven) for events that are only relevant to a few hundred people—and funnel that money, instead, into projects and gatherings that reach many more?

What's a Quaker theology of money? We don't know, because we don't talk about it, and to find our theology, we have to talk about it *a lot*. The Quaker testimonies that many of us point to didn't spring up overnight. We discovered them, collectively, by devoting ourselves to God and by then by learning what the external, visible fruits of spiritual transformation are likely to be. As covenant communities, we have not done this with our money—because we're scared, I think, and because society tells us not to.

Where's that famous Quaker rebellious streak? I think we can be brave and take this on.

Inward and Outward

I've been wondering about something.

In recent decades, Friends have been big on categorizing. I think this stems from our committee system. In order to make committee assignments make sense, we feel the need to divide up work into types based on categories. Fair enough. Humans have always practiced sorting. It's an important part of how we engage with the world. It's why we give children match-the-shapes worksheets.

We name the categories different things in different institutions, but the categories themselves remain essentially the same. There's a caring-for-us category, which deals with spiritual formation and pastoral care of people in the meeting and sometimes religious education as well. There's a caring-for-our-stuff category, which deals with property and budgets. There's a caring-for-the-neighborhood category, which involves community ministries like food pantries and drop-in centers. There's a caring-for-the-world category, in which we place missions work. But there's also a witnessing-to-the-world category, which involves larger-than-local activism that is often but not always political. And there's a sharing-the-Good-News category, which encompasses outreach and evangelism...two words which may or may not be synonymous, depending on what group of Friends you belong to.

We sort these categories even further, into two groups, sometimes. Today I'll call them "inward" and "outward."

INWARD: caring-for-us, caring-for-our-stuff

OUTWARD: caring-for-the-neighborhood, caring-for-the-world, witnessing-to-the-world, sharing-the-Good-News

My own work mostly falls in the "inward" category, but that's not because I believe it's more important than "outward." It's just because that's where I'm called. My hope, on the whole, is that we as a Religious Society of Friends will collectively devote more time to "outward" than "inward," if for no

other reason than the “outward” part seems like it would involve more work proportionately. We mostly don’t do that, though. How come?

One reason we spend so much time on “inward” is because we invest so much time in committees, which are often the wrong institutional structure for what we’re trying to do. Therefore, they drain spiritual energy rather than support it. Our larger-than-local Quaker institutions also try to do all the discernment at occasional gatherings as opposed to letting leadings rise up from local meetings and trusting staff or small committees with routine decisions. If we don’t trust each other, we make every little step a matter of concern for the whole community, and that approach takes up a lot of our time.

The “inward” work is essential. Don’t get me wrong. But I think we spend more time on it than we have to, collectively, to do what we’re actually called to do.

Another thing: we Friends don’t agree on what “outward” should look like. Most pastoral meetings focus their energy on caring-for-the-neighborhood and caring-for-the-world, while many unprogrammed meetings don’t do these things at all. On the other hand, most unprogrammed meetings do a lot of witnessing-to-the-world, while many pastoral meetings skip it altogether.

These discrepancies stem from cultural and theological differences and have a lot to do with our divergent historical influences. The terminology itself often gets in the way. Unprogrammed meetings might say “we don’t do missions” because they associate missions with colonialism, but there are anti-colonialist methods of feeding the hungry and educating children, and pastoral Friends are making real progress with those methods. And pastoral meetings might say “we’re not activists” because they associate government lobbying with left-wing politics, but Friends everywhere could be lobbying for human rights and an end to war, and unprogrammed Friends have a head start at knowing how to do this. It’s one more reason for us to be communicating.

But here’s what’s really confusing me: Quakers are renowned for what we’ve done outwardly over the centuries, not inwardly. What happened? There are still many among us who are called to this work...all of it, from caring-for-the-neighborhood to caring-for-the-world to witnessing-to-the-world to sharing-the-Good-News.

So where are today’s John Woolmans and Lucretia Motts?

Forgive me for sounding like a broken record, but I think we have them—and we’re putting them on committees.

For our first several hundred years, Friends did not nominate to committees. We recorded. What did that mean? Well, recorded elders and recorded overseers were definitely doing inward-facing work. (An elder was a person of any age that God had called to care for the spiritual needs of God’s community. An overseer was a person that God had called to care for the physical and temporal needs of God’s community.) But recorded ministers were a lot of different things: preachers, writers, publishers, street-corner evangelists, missionaries, activists, protestors, community organizers, sometimes even builders of schools and hospitals and universities...for our first several hundred years, we did not distinguish between inward and outward ministry. It was all considered part of the same essential function, which was speaking God’s truth into the world.

When we place our outward-facing ministers on committees, we restrict what they are able to do. They can fund missions but not be missionaries. They can write minutes about gun violence for our approval but not advocate directly with political officials or hold talking circles in communities about guns. Or rather, they can do these outward-facing things, and many do, but they're often not part of the committee's job description and therefore not funded and not part of their annual reports. We treat such activities institutionally as if they're not part of our covenant community—which is, of course, completely absurd. If we're called to be building the Kingdom of God on Earth, that must extend beyond the meetinghouse.

What would happen if we recorded our outward-facing ministers? Our evangelists, our missionaries, our activists, our community organizers? Recording, we say, is about writing down what God has already made true. And we have these Friends. God has made it true. When we record a Friend's gifts in ministry, we put ourselves as a community on notice: God is moving here, and we are responsible for nurturing and supporting this ministry. We are also responsible for receiving its fruit. That's huge. It's putting a lot on the covenant community, and if we're going to manage it, we'll have to stop spending six hours on which color to paint the bathrooms. But I'd rather say yes to the big thing. Wouldn't you?

Technology and Geography

Well before 2020, it was possible to connect and build a community across great distances. I'd been convening Quaker committee meetings on Zoom for years, often from unusual places, like an airport in Ohio or an apartment in London. But that was a result of my unusual circumstances. Most Friends, even those who used videoconferencing tools professionally or who socialized on various Internet platforms, didn't think about Quaker stuff that way.

What the Covid-19 pandemic changed (in terms of technology) was not what was possible but what we considered normal. A few of our meetings are still in conflict over will-we-or-won't-we incorporate technology, while others have explicitly decided not to—which I think is totally reasonable, if the meeting is called that way. But many of us, at least in North America and Europe, are operating under the assumption that our hybrid and online meetings for worship are permanent.

And this intrigues me. For one thing, building a hybrid or online Quaker community requires reexamining a lot more than how we worship. But for another, I think it opens new doors for how we do institutions and covenant communities.

Friends have always assumed that the ways in which we work together must be rooted in geography. Quarterly and yearly meetings, for example, were originally established in keeping with how far it seemed reasonable to ride a horse. But if more and more gatherings are happening online, then geography is a lot less relevant than it used to be.

Many Quaker meetings have attenders now, even members, that are hundreds or thousands of miles from their meetinghouse. Is it a stretch to think that, given the less-geographic nature of our "local" meetings, we might start to feel differently about our geographic quarterly or yearly meetings? If

it's just as easy to participate in a gathering six time zones away as the gathering of your own yearly meeting, why would you not participate just as readily in the one that's six time zones away?

This ease of new associations has some drawbacks. For example, if we aren't deliberate in our choices, we might shift from geographic silos to ideological or cultural ones, which I'd assert isn't spiritually healthy for anybody.

But I also see a heck of an upside. I'm excited about cross-institutional projects that can bring us together across our institutional boundaries. Of course, that's always been possible. Our umbrella organizations (like Friends World Committee for Consultation, Friends United Meeting, and Friends General Conference) have been bridging yearly meeting relationships for years. The difference I see is how easy and how natural participation has become. Friends are now accustomed to joining far-away groups online.

A few years back, I had a conversation with a staff member of a yearly meeting. "I want to do more programming that's open to Friends outside our organization," he said. "But when such things are proposed, I run into a problem. The Friends who approve the budget and who supervise my time as a staff member remind me that my job is to support Friends within this yearly meeting. Rightly or wrongly, that puts some restraints on what I can do."

In the past, even when we could move beyond *intentional* siloing like this Friend was talking about, *unintentional* siloing often prevented collaboration. Committee structures, staff work patterns, and communications networks were all designed within the boundaries of specific institutions. Even Friends who really wanted to collaborate had to go out of their normal behavior patterns to do it.

I think this is changing. Take a look at this quote from a participant in the three-year Quaker parent mutual support group project: "Thank you. I'm not even completely sure how I ended up on the initial invitation list to join the groups but whatever the Universe aligned to make it happen, I am grateful." In the case of these groups, most of the parents and even the facilitators probably could not have accurately identified where the institutional support for the groups came from. I gave them that information, but they didn't find it memorable.

(For the record: financial support for the parent groups came from New York Yearly Meeting, New England Yearly Meeting, Friends United Meeting, and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Significant logistical and communications support came from those four institutions plus Britain Yearly Meeting, Friends World Committee for Consultation Europe and Middle East Section, and Friends General Conference. Many other institutions helped with promotion, and some of the volunteer facilitators came from yet other groups.)

When the institutional origin of opportunities becomes less clear, I think that starts to shake our institutional siloing. I also recognize that the shift I'm describing isn't entirely without disadvantages. There's potential for it to make institutional fundraising more difficult, for example, and necessarily geographic ministries (like soup kitchens and drop-in centers) may struggle to not get lost in the shuffle.

But rather than go too far into the pluses and minuses, which I'll leave for another day, I want to name this phenomenon as something that *is*. Our new habits around technology are shaking the geographic nature of our institutions. What might that mean for the future of our covenant community?

Are There Boundaries on Covenant?

My favorite definition of covenant is that we give ourselves to God and God, in turn, gives us to a group of people. It is then our responsibility, as a group, to provide mutual care, support, and accountability and to discern the will of God for each of us as individuals and for the community as a whole. It sounds elegant but is, in practice, extremely messy—although also a potentially transformative experience.

Historically, Friends have engaged in these covenant relationships within the context of local meetings and churches. My monthly meeting is a covenant community, but those of us who are part of that community are also in wider covenant with the quarterly meeting, the yearly meeting, and the Religious Society of Friends. This creates a webbed system of smaller and larger covenant communities, each of which has its own institutional structure (named roles, pathways for service, rules and procedures, bank accounts, buildings, sometimes staff). For a long time, this has served us well.

But a number of things have happened that are shaking this up.

In the past couple of decades, some Friends have searched for more intimate, more spiritually deep covenant communities. Especially but not only in the unprogrammed tradition, there have been Friends who've felt their meetings were not equipped for devoted listening and spiritual transformation. This feels to me like a fair criticism. Perhaps it's our shortage of religious education; perhaps it's the difficulties we have trusting each other. Whatever the reason, some meetings do lack depth.

New forms have sprung up to support Friends who are seeking a deeper experience than the one they're having in their meeting. Some are spiritual formation programs, such as those offered through School of the Spirit or Way of the Spirit. But others are structures without particular content, designed to encourage the type of ongoing commitment that we ideally find in covenant communities—that is, mutual commitment within a group of people to one another's spiritual growth. A number of such models exist. Marcelle Martin's "faithfulness groups" are one example.

Separately from this, but I suspect not disconnected causally, has been a movement of young adults that are either disinterested in membership in a meeting or that seek membership directly in a larger-than-local meeting. This is a significant shift. There have been Friends for decades who have not sought membership despite attending local meetings, but many of the young adults (and middle-aged adults) that I'm talking about here do not attend local meetings at all. I've been part of conversations about reforming membership for years, although I've never been the driver behind those conversations. I'm motivated by the old saying about the baby and the bathwater. Membership exists for some reason or reasons, and we shouldn't get rid of it or change it without understanding why our ancestors established it.

One reason—not the only one—was that membership has been a sort of recording of covenant relationship, the act of writing something down that God has already made true. There are now quite a lot of Friends who don't feel that God has given them to any particular group of people—at least, not in the manner that Quakers in general are accustomed to seeing that happen.

But it is happening. It's just happening in new ways.

First, through structures like faithfulness groups. There are lots of Friends who participate in small groups of mutual accountability who are also faithful attenders and participants in local meetings, but there are some Friends for whom the small group is the primary connection to Quakerism.

Second, through new forms of membership. Many Friends' groups have established new types of formal membership—so many now that I've lost track of some. In most cases, this new membership is affiliation directly to a yearly meeting, but not always.

Third, through the almost-accidental formation of new "meetings," most of which technically aren't meetings at all. Especially since 2020, although the phenomenon started quietly a bit earlier than that, there have been groups of Friends gathering for worship and fellowship outside of the traditional local meeting structure, mostly online. Some of these groups are affiliated with retreat centers. Others began with groups of acquaintances and grew. A participant in the Quaker parent groups said by survey, "In my group, I consistently feel a sense of connection and shared belonging that I appreciate more than words can express. Over these last months this group of parents spanning two continents have become my Meeting. We've elected to continue Meeting on our own, beyond the end of the official program, because so many of us feel that connection." Creating new meetings was not part of the design of these groups, and by traditional Quaker procedures, a new meeting cannot be formed that way. And yet...

A fourth departure is the growing number of independent meetings, most of which are the result of institutional splintering of a yearly meeting. Some Quaker meetings and churches, rather than choose to affiliate with one post-split group or another, have withdrawn and aren't attached to either. Quaker umbrella organizations have begun receiving requests for membership from monthly meetings that are unaffiliated with any yearly meeting. This is very much a parallel to direct membership for individuals in yearly meetings because it skips the traditional affiliative step in-between.

The fifth and final departure is (mostly) young adult Friends who identify wholeheartedly as Quaker but do not attend any meeting ever. This is a group that's hard to survey or count because, by definition, they're disconnected from our institutional structures. We do not know how many of them there are. We do not know what their lives or practices are like or why they name themselves as Friends. The information we have is anecdotal at best. I don't know for certain that they're finding ways to practice covenant community and corporate discernment—but I strongly suspect at least some of them are, in ways that we Quakers would not historically recognize.

I believe that corporate discernment is an essential part of Quaker practice, including submission to the sense of the meeting. Without this, we're practicing Ranterism, which is the belief that God speaks directly to all people and that the only thing the individual must do is act however they sense God leading. We've learned, over time, how easily that theology can take us to a place of individualism and egocentrism.

But when it comes to the formation of covenant communities, the group in which we practice corporate discernment and spiritual support and accountability, what "counts," exactly? Must covenant communities fit into our traditional institutional structures?

Well. Let's try it:

The new formal membership pathways (the paragraph above that starts “second”) are specifically intended to bring those Friends who are not associated with traditional local meetings into the pre-existing institutional system. This provides a clear pathway for such Friends to participate in the discernment and the activities of a wider group of Quakers.

Meetings that have accidentally formed (the paragraph above that starts “third”) can ask, if they so discern, to be taken under the care of a local, regional, or yearly meeting. This might be frowned upon, since in most places, new meetings are supposed to be approved before they are formed, not accepted after—but we’d probably get past that. A bit trickier might be the fact that such meetings would be expected to conduct themselves in accordance with the *Faith and Practice* of their new affiliation and to support the wider group’s work with their time and their money. And it may not be clear which group to join, especially if the new meeting is online and not tied to any particular geographic place.

The theoretical downside of any meeting continuing independently, either because it sprang up “accidentally” or because it started as a faithfulness group or because it withdrew from affiliation after a split, is that there’s no formal pathway for Friends in those meetings to participate in the wider Quaker community. They are guests of, not members of, any large gathering they might choose to join. There’s no obvious way, in our traditional systems, for such meetings to send minutes to other groups for further discernment, for example. Partly because of this isolation, independent meetings and churches may also drift away from Quaker theology. There are a number of previously independent Quaker meetings that have already become community churches or re-affiliated with other denominations.

And what about Friends not practicing with a meeting at all? For this group, there is no apparent pathway to affiliation with Quakerism unless such Friends are willing and able to alter their practice and join a meeting. By traditional definition, there is no other way to be a Friend.

The above paragraphs may feel dense and possibly even confusing. That’s because what I’ve been doing—deliberately—is trying to cram new shapes of covenant communities into our previously existing boxes. This can mostly be done with effort, but it feels absurd. Our ancestors did not design our institutional structures because they felt the world really needed another legalistic, inflexible system. They did it because local, regional, and yearly meetings were the right form of institutional support for what God was doing *at that time* with covenant communities.

I think there’s ample evidence now that God is doing something new and amazing with covenant communities—but at the same time, many of our institutional systems are falling to pieces. That’s at least partly because they’re no longer an entirely adequate match for today’s covenant community. I don’t think we should give up our whole concept of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. For some of us, these groups are still working well. But what I do see is God calling us to something more, in addition—not an elimination, but a widening.

We give ourselves to God and God gives us, in turn, to a group of people. If that’s now happening outside the context of our traditional systems, we’ll need to adapt.

On Moral Purity

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ...now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body...as it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.” – from 1 Corinthians 12

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” – from 2 Corinthians 6

I’m no Biblical scholar or proof-texter, but it feels to me like the passages above are fundamentally in conflict. One epistle is telling us to hold together. No one can quit or kick someone out of the body of Christ; our differences are not a flaw but an asset. The other epistle is telling us pull apart, to distance ourselves from those who are unlike us.

Which way are Friends going to go?

I guess you could say the two passages aren’t in conflict, that the first is talking about diversity among believers and the second is talking about unbelievers. But in Quakerism, the definition of “unbelievers” isn’t clear. It depends on which yearly meeting you’re standing in at the moment you have the conversation.

I don’t imagine our Quaker ancestors anticipated the theological drift that would come from establishing multiple yearly meetings. They established them because you can only ride a horse so far. And they had traveling ministers that regularly crossed the boundaries from one to another, partly because these ministers served as a circulatory system, to help hold us together as a people. We still thought of ourselves as one Religious Society.

That didn’t last long, at least in the United States. We wound up splitting, and kind of a lot, and sometimes over theological positions that Quakers today would find nearly indistinguishable. We referred in our minutes to “those other people called Quakers.” I suspect we thought we were unyoking ourselves from unbelievers. All of us, and on all sides.

The result has been dividing ourselves into groups that contain progressively less ideological diversity. (I use the word “ideological” deliberately because I think most splits are about both theological and cultural differences.) But does this mean that our newly formed, smaller yearly meetings get along all the time? No. Given a couple of decades, we simply find new things to disagree about.

We also start to become more extreme. The sociological phenomenon of group polarization tells us that isolated groups, over time, become more radical in their ideological positions because of the absence of anyone to articulate an opposing position. Our intention to practice discernment and deep listening to God, rather than simply engage in discussion, does not protect us from this trend.

Some Friends do try hard to cross ideological lines, to hold us together through intervisitation and umbrella organizations. But others are either disinterested in such connections or actively try to prevent them.

It's that second category that concerns me most because it is born from a concept of moral purity—the practice of refusing to engage with those who are ideologically different because to do so might cause one to be sullied in some way. In 2023, this tendency toward moral purity is equally present in yearly meetings that are ideologically conservative and yearly meetings that are ideologically liberal.

(By the way, I'm running into serious limitations on my vocabulary options, because of course the issue is more complicated than two-sided-ness, and part of the problem is envisioning our world as having exactly and only two sides. In reality, our human perspectives are a tangled mess of theological, political, and social beliefs, each of which exists on a spectrum, and they don't always fit together in predictable ways. Also, there's at least some ideological diversity within each yearly meeting—more than is readily apparent because Friends with minority positions know that speaking up can lead to attack and ostracization. But in broad terms, there are yearly meetings that are ideologically liberal, and there are yearly meetings that are ideologically conservative, and within those categories there are more and less ideologically extreme groups, although the differences can be tricky to distinguish by folks at the opposite end of the spectrum.)

Moral purity is a trap. It inevitably leads to rifts and conflicts. Sometimes it even leads to war. It is self-reinforcing and mutually-reinforcing. The practice of moral purity leads us into dehumanization of the other and away from genuine hope for change. It is the antithesis of a belief in the possibility of spiritual transformation in ourselves and others. It says that the best way to become more perfect is by doubling down on the people we already are and that there is nothing in the “other” that is worth engaging with—in other words, it denies the very idea that there is that of God in everyone and that we are charged to answer it.

Moral purity is not about saying “this idea is true” or “that behavior is wrong.” Some things are true. Others are false. Some behaviors are right. Others are wrong. And a lot else falls in the middle, of course.

But moral purity, as I'm defining it, is saying “I will not interact with a person / piece of writing / group that does not agree this idea is true” or “I will not interact with a person / piece of writing / group that doesn't agree that that behavior is wrong.” The opposite of moral purity is not moral relativism. It's respect for and engagement with our fellow human beings.

Most often, ideologically conservative groups say, “We will not interact with those ‘others’ because doing so is a threat to our immortal souls and/or to the work God is doing through us.”

And most often, ideologically liberal groups say, “We will not interact with those ‘others’ because doing so implies support for the person/idea/group that is utterly wrong and causes us to be complicit...and/or, we will not interact with the person/idea/group that is utterly wrong because such interaction is, in itself, inherently harmful to our wellbeing.”

The reasons we give are different. The results are the same.

Change does not happen through lack of interaction. Change happens through the culmination of many surprising acts of love. No matter what our current belief system might be, we can be changed only by seeing how the world can be different. This is not possible without genuine relationship across ideological differences. Without such relationship, neither we nor the people we define as “other” can be

changed. For all God's power, spiritual transformation very rarely happens in total isolation. We must first be exposed to another possibility.

Those who design and perpetuate systems of moral purity are aware this. Moral purity can so easily be used for ideological control. If we never allow ourselves to be exposed to ideas different from our own, we will never push back against the ideological system we've been taught. Our inability to question is to someone's advantage.

Moral purity is self-reinforcing because the longer we stay in it the more disconnected we are from the realization that reality is not what we believe it to be. And when we interact only within ideologically similar groups, the group as a whole becomes more and more extreme, and individuals have less and less freedom to express a different perspective. Moral purity is also mutually-reinforcing because each group, staring across a chasm at the "other," sees the opposite group also becoming more extreme—and therefore more threatening.

Eventually, moral purity takes us to a point where we cease to recognize the "others" as human beings with inherent worth who are connected to God and who are capable of growth. At that point, the only option we see for a solution is to overpower "them," either by violence or by seizing control of governments and other institutional systems so that the "other" will be forced to do what is "right"—or, at the very least, to not interfere with our doing so.

When early Friends talked about "living in that life and power which takes away the occasion of all wars," I do not believe this is what they meant.

So what moral purity are we hanging on to?

For ideologically conservative Friends, it's generally Christ, but Christ as interpreted through a particular theological lens, and very much tangled up with ideas that stem from historical conservative white Christianity.

For ideologically liberal Friends, it's generally anti-racism and LGBTQ human rights, but these ideas as interpreted through a particular lens that is very much tangled up with a movement that stems from sociological academia.

Are these two sets of ideas directly parallel? Of course not, but we ourselves have set them in opposition—though not intentionally—as they have gained traction in different yearly meetings. And the distance has then increased because of cultural forces and group polarization.

Faithfulness to Christ and advocacy for human rights and dignity *are not the problem*. The beliefs and behaviors are our best efforts at faithfulness. The problem is the thread of moral purity that is woven into each of these ideologies today. It's the idea of shutting down or backing away from relationships with those who aren't subscribing to the same ideology.

Regardless of our reasons for doing it, shutting down relationships is, in itself, a danger to us as Friends. Our theology tells us that we discover God's will for us through continuing revelation by committing to corporate discernment together. But institutionally, we've created a bunch of distinct yearly meetings, and because they don't mix much, they have developed distinct ideologies over time, and some are now *refusing to interact with each other*.

To frame this in the Bible verses I started with, we appear to have each decided that certain other groups are Friends are unbelievers and that, therefore, we should not be yoked together. To me, though, it feels a lot more like the eye saying to the hand, “I don’t need you!”

This is not about any of us compromising our beliefs. It’s about not giving up on each other, about refusing to sever our covenant relationships, about believing in corporate discernment, and about searching for that of God in each other that we can then answer, when we find it.

From Here to There

So what?

Back on page three, I told you this series would be “about our institutions—the theology behind them, the ways in which God uses them, the ways in which they hold us (and God’s purposes) back, and some thoughts on how we might move forward.” And though I’ve been aiming for how we might move forward, it’s taken twenty-seven essays to cover the present and the past, to set the stage of where we’ve been and where I believe we are today.

A quick review:

I’ve talked about our institutions as practical frameworks to support covenant community. The right institutional structure frees us to discern and act on the will of God; the wrong institutional structure drains our energy.

And I’ve talked about covenant communities, groups in which we listen for God’s will together, and how we’re experiencing new forms of covenant community that may challenge our reliance on geographically-designated groups and even bring us into an entirely different system of covenant communities—something that goes beyond our traditional monthly, regional, and yearly meetings. The very nature of belonging is shifting today, which does not mean there is no more belonging.

I focused on the trust and vulnerability required in covenant community and how, throughout history, we Friends have created a variety of systems to help us trust. I touched on the existence of power differentials among Friends and the ways in which ignoring or misusing our power disrupts that trust.

I spent considerable time on how we’re in relationship within our covenant communities and the ways in which our institutional structures can encourage or disrupt relationship, sometimes by things as simple as failing to notice and respect cultural diversity within the group. I talked about why disrupting relationship is dangerous, leading to splits and fractures in our covenant.

I wrote about the difference between recording and nominating, roles and committees, and why committees are too rigid a response for many of the ways in which God calls us. Affirming ministry, on the other hand, is a risky but worthwhile practice requiring discipline, and we’ve often defined ministry much too narrowly. When we shifted from recording of roles to committees and nominations, we set up a system that often puts Friends in impossible situations, then blames them when they don’t succeed...which is incredibly difficult on everyone, especially when we forget that our worth is not about what we do.

I've spoken about the uneasy relationship between Quaker theology and the structures that nonprofit law demands we use in our institutions, when in fact, Quakers do things very differently, and it's more natural for our networks and processes to be embedded in human beings. Connected here are the ways in which we think about money, how this often becomes a stumbling block, and how we might think about money differently.

I've tried hard to keep all of this rooted in Quaker theology, because perfecting our institutional systems is not the point: the point is discernment, continuing revelation, building on the teachings of our ancestors, and the essential truths that we have learned and try to live by.

Now I'm ready to move on to what's next.

We're experiencing massive change, like it or not, and I don't think any of us have missed this. The whole of the world is fluctuating chaotically—biologically, sociologically, technologically, and politically. Quakerism, too, is going to change. In fact, Quakerism is already changing. In North America and Europe, we're experiencing that change partly as shrinking, splitting, and collapsing, but we know that the world is every bit as much in need of the fundamental, eternal truths of Quakerism as ever. We can hear from God; we hear better in community; there is a power that can take away the occasion for war; we can be transformed; we can live in the Kingdom of God on Earth.

In the places where our institutions are struggling, it's not because Friends' principles have become less relevant. I believe it's because we are trying to perpetuate institutional systems that are no longer adequate for the world we live in. God is calling us to new forms of covenant community, but our institutions have not kept up.

I believe we are a people with a calling, the same calling we've always had: to be well-versed in Quaker theology, confident in our identity but humble in our practice, spiritually transformational, and actively building the Kingdom of God on Earth (and not just inside our meetinghouses). But to support this in the modern era, our institutions will need to change.

The rest of this series will be about how I think we can get from here to there.

A Web, Not Chains

Learn to function as a web, not in chains.

No single institution can get Friends where we need to go: not local meetings, not yearly meetings, not even umbrella organizations. Not schools. Not retreat centers. Not advocacy groups or NGOs or diplomacy arms. None of them. Each was created for some particular purpose, but none was intended to work in a vacuum. All were meant to be a part of the Religious Society of Friends—but to maintain the wider relationships, we are fighting against institutional momentum.

Institutions, by their nature, tend to incentivize work that benefits those within the institution. For example, a local meeting mostly creates systems that serve the needs of the people within that local meeting. A retreat center focuses on programming that will support the mission of the center, both substantively and financially. An advocacy group will focus on its advocacy work and will naturally invest time in political relationships and hiring and training excellent staff. All of these are good things,

done for clear reasons that the people in the group understand, usually producing results that are in keeping with the purpose of the organization. There's nothing wrong with any of that.

In contrast, reaching beyond the individual institution for collaboration and relationship-building is generally not incentivized. Our communications systems, budgets, committee assignments, staff job descriptions, and projects are all designed to meet the needs of the people in *this* institution. We know, at least in theory, that being part of something bigger than ourselves is important. It's important for practical reasons (such as not reinventing the wheel) and for the future of each institution (in terms of nurturing the Friends who will someday step into service positions) and for our spiritual understanding of the world (in terms of discernment moving through the wider body). But actually reaching beyond requires us to step outside of our day-to-day activities as an institution. Doing so is difficult and takes time that we may not feel able to spare.

Recognizing both the importance of staying in relationship and the natural tendency to drift apart, Friends have set up systems that are intended to tie our groups together. Local meetings are part of regional meetings. Regional meetings are part of yearly meetings. Yearly meetings are part of umbrella organizations. Schools, universities, and retreat centers are under the care of whatever Quaker group launched them, at least in the beginning, although that often doesn't last. And many other outward-facing organizations, such as NGOs and advocacy groups, don't have formal connections at all. They were formed by Friends who recognized that our existing institutional structures couldn't do the kinds of outward-facing ministries to which they felt led.

Our formal systems of connection often don't work well, and they create the illusion that we're attached in chains: one link is the local meeting, the next link is the regional meeting, the next link is the yearly meeting, which is linked to umbrella organizations and advocacy groups and diplomacy arms and...and...and...

Just as internal institutional systems tend to reinforce institutional siloing, the formal establishment of pathways for relationships tend to reinforce the illusion that these are the only ways we can connect. For example, Friends in a local meeting, after approving a minute, tend to send the minute directly to the next gathering of the regional meeting. But why do we do that? Doing so doesn't invite the discernment of all the Friends in the region; it invites the discernment of the very small number of Friends who show up at the gathering. Nominations to umbrella organization committees are channeled through yearly meetings, but why do we do that? Doing so doesn't actually ensure that yearly meetings are well represented, but it does narrow the selection pool to Friends active enough in yearly meeting activities to be known by the yearly meeting nominating committee.

The formalized system of institutional connections also assumes that each group is healthy enough to take on its assigned functions, and in reality, they often are not. Many yearly meeting organizations aren't capable of supporting the monthly meetings within them; many monthly meetings aren't capable of caring for the schools that are theoretically under their care. But these relationships do not change because no one wants to name the dysfunction or step on anyone else's toes.

We can do all of this differently. We can decide to function as a web. We started out that way, and we can do it again.

Friends are part of a covenant community across the Religious Society of Friends. Within that, we have a bunch of institutions, bigger ones and smaller ones, most of which are worshiping groups but some of which are intended for other purposes. And within these and between them, we have a whole bunch of unofficial groups that aren't institutions but that are nevertheless functional communities or networks. All put together, these look like a spiderweb: a little messy but mostly following a navigable pattern.

Each little community of Friends is on this web somewhere. The significance of thinking of it *as* a web is this: if you're walking along a web, you can walk in a bunch of different directions. Some parts of the web are closer than others, but there aren't any you can't get to, because you're not limited to walking up and down a single thread.

When I say that Friends need to function as a web, not in chains, I mean that we need to understand our formal institutional ties are only part of our actual ties and that we can reach out to one another in a lot more ways than we currently do.

One way to do this is as part of a discernment process. If my own meeting—15th Street, in New York City—minutes a concern, our most common reaction is to forward that minute to the quarterly meeting or to a yearly meeting committee. We do this because we have a sense that doing so is in right order, but that way of thinking is comparatively new among Quakers. It used to be that we would send Friends to carry the concern and talk about it in nearby meetings, spreading the word and starting the discernment in other places before it came up at quarterly meeting. In fact, it probably would not come up at quarterly meeting until there was a general sense that most of the meetings in the quarter were already thinking about the matter.

Or suppose the concern had something to do with immigration, specifically immigration to the United States of people coming through Mexico. There isn't actually any reason we in New York City shouldn't contact a meeting in Arizona or Texas directly for information, advice, or partnership. Such contact shouldn't be a way to go around the discernment of our own yearly meeting, but sometimes we're not asking the yearly meeting to do anything. Sometimes we're just looking for a better way to address the concern within our own community.

Functioning as a web isn't only about externally facing concerns. We can do the same with fellowship and religious education. I wonder whether it could be the default for meetings holding special occasions (like a barbecue or a birthday celebration or a beach trip) to invite other meetings in the geographic area. Or maybe, especially with today's technology, an unprogrammed meeting in Maine and a programmed meeting in Iowa could hold a religious education series together, as a way of learning more about both Quakerism and each other.

I know from experience that building relationships, even if done with no motivation beyond fellowship, results in better cross-institutional communications flow. I rarely go a week without connecting one Friend to another because I've heard, either personally or through the grapevine, that the two are working on similar projects. Our database of knowledge is embedded in people anyway; let's do as much as possible to build on that by connecting with each other.

Cross-institutional projects are also born on this web, and their strength tends to be their informal beginnings. When two institutions meet formally with the intention to design a project mutually, they trip over their own internal systems, which are not intended to support collaboration. But sparks can fly because a staff member of an advocacy group, the clerk of a quarterly meeting, and a Quaker videographer find themselves in the same room at the same time and discover their common concern for paid maternity leave. The very diversity of their positions, knowledge, and networks is the strength of whatever new ministry might emerge.

As we experiment with cross-institutional and non-traditional collaborations, we'll discover that the ways we can use money are more agile than we thought and that Friends will share their time and their gifts more easily when the potential impact is high and the container is flexible (in contrast to most committees). This doesn't and shouldn't eliminate the concept of spiritual accountability. Such collaborations and ministries *should* be accountable, but does that always mean accountable to a pre-established committee in a pre-established meeting? Or can we put a ministry support group in place?

Learn to function as a web, not in chains. If all this is feeling complicated and you're wanting a simpler version, here it is:

- If you're doing a thing and can invite more Friends to join, do so. You don't have to invite the whole world every time, but invite somebody.
- If your local Friends community is led to do a thing and it'll take more than just you to do it, reach out to whomever makes sense, as opposed to reaching out through traditional channels out of habit or because you think that's all you're allowed to do.
- If you're a Friend who spends a lot of time working within Quaker institutions, put up your antennae for the non-traditional collaboration. Start with whatever seems possible and try it.

Over time, the more we make use of the web, the easier using the web will be. Our communications channels, funding streams, and human networks will all grow stronger across traditional boundaries, and the Religious Society of Friends will become more resilient as a result.

Commit to Covenant

Commit to covenant, and institutions will follow.

In an earlier essay, I talked about my suspicion that institutions split because the covenant community has split first. What if we can bring institutions together by going through the same steps in reverse? What if unifying institutions begins by unifying the covenant community?

In the mid-20th century, several yearly meetings reunified following splits between Orthodox and Hicksite Friends. It happened in part because the Friends involved were clear that their differences had become less important than the leading to unify. New York Yearly Meeting said, "We shall continue to share our differences, which serve a useful purpose. God does not ask us for conformity, but calls us to unity, in obedience to the leadings of the spirit." We recognized that to be connected did not require us to be the same.

I believe all Friends are connected, simply because there is no human way to throw a person or group out of the Religious Society of Friends. The Religious Society of Friends, as a whole, does not have an institution. So it's not possible to disaffiliate someone. The only thing we can do is cease to behave as though we are in covenant with them.

This strikes me as powerful. Put together with what I said in my last post, it means that we have a huge ability to influence the future of the Religious Society of Friends, and all we must do is decide how we'll behave. If we accept covenant to mean "I give myself to God, and God gives me, in turn, to a group of people," then who do I believe is that group of people? Do I believe it is the Religious Society of Friends? Perhaps not, but if I do, then the Religious Society of Friends is my group, and no set of minutes nor written institutional procedures can prevent me from speaking and acting that way.

Genuine covenant relationships are messy. To behave as though we are in covenant with one another does not mean ignoring bad behavior or prioritizing polite silence over truthful disagreements. It means listening deeply, encouraging mutual growth, arguing, apologizing, forgiving, and returning again and again to corporate discernment. It also means teaching what corporate discernment means and setting boundaries as to what constitutes acceptable behavior—and for genuine covenant relationships across differences, those boundaries will have to permit a lot of what makes us feel uncomfortable.

What I see is a world in which the Religious Society of Friends is changing wildly. This is happening whether we like it or not and regardless of whether we act, react, or simply ignore the phenomenon. Many of our individual institutions will not weather the storm. They are too small, and they change too slowly. When we act with efforts to rescue the institution, we're ignoring a much larger covenant community, which is thriving in all kinds of non-traditional ways.

I believe that if we commit to the covenant community first—the whole covenant community, not just the part of it within our own institutional boundaries—then our institutions will be able to follow. It will happen messily, but it will happen.

Too vague? Here's an imaginary example.

Lavender Friends Church has a membership of sixty-five people but only about eighteen in worship on the average Sunday. But Lavender Friends Church does have a strong food pantry that is very much needed in the local community. For the past ten years, it's gotten harder and harder for Lavender Friends Church to access as much food as is needed for the food pantry. They're also having a lot of trouble getting sufficient volunteers.

The logical thing to do is probably to reach out to Plum Friends Church, which is on the other side of town and which belongs to the same yearly meeting. So Lavender Friends Church does this. But Plum Friends Church is not interested in collaborating. They have their own food pantry to worry about, and they're so anxious about not getting enough resources together that they can't imagine sparing the energy to work with somebody else.

Lavender Friends Church is discouraged but not surprised. The two meetings have had an uneasy relationship ever since Plum Friends Church was established. Something about an argument between cousins, although nobody remembers exactly what the issue was.

So Lavender Friends Church decides to reach out to Mauve Monthly Meeting and Fuchsia Friends Church. They're both about thirty-five miles away, but maybe they'd help. Turns out the answer is yes. Mauve Monthly Meeting, which is in a wealthy area, agrees to be an additional food drop-off point and drive donations down once a week. Fuchsia Friends Church is quite rural and mostly aging, but it has an endowment, so Fuchsia agrees to send \$500 each month to help with any necessary purchases.

All this means that Lavender Friends Church can now open the food pantry twice a week instead of once. They set the new hours for Wednesday evenings and Saturday mornings.

But they're still having a lot of trouble staffing the food pantry. There just aren't enough volunteers. They try recruiting non-Friends, but they still can't get enough. Then one person makes a brave suggestion. What if they wrote to Jade Friends Meeting?

Jade Friends Meeting is only a thirty-minute drive away, and it has a huge population of teens and young adults. One problem: Jade Friends Meeting is part of Green Yearly Meeting, and all the other meetings involved are part of Purple Yearly Meeting. There are real theological differences between the two.

They try it anyway, and Jade Friends Meeting says they'll help. This isn't an easy decision. It takes six months and a fair number of visitors back and forth. The groups haven't been in communication in a couple of decades, and they've heard a lot of not-great things about each other. It takes some time to build trust.

A year later, Jade Friends Meeting is sending groups of teens and young adults twice a month for overnights at Lavender Friends Church. They have social time and dinner Friday night, work at the food pantry Saturday morning, and then have a Bible study followed by volleyball games Saturday afternoon. Several grandchildren of members of Lavender Friends Church get wind of this and start showing up—at first for the volleyball games, but then for the whole weekend.

Plum Friends Church realizes that the food pantry across town is now far more effective than their own. They could choose to double down on jealousy and territorialism, but instead, they offer to combine efforts. Lavender Friends Church, rather than getting into a snit, welcomes the additional resources, and Plum Friends Church's food pantry becomes a Monday evening annex under the same loose organizational structure.

Five years later, Plum Friends Church and Lavender Friends Church start to talk about merging into a single meeting.

A couple years after that, Fuschia Friends Church lays itself down as the last of its members prepare for the end of their lives. They discover they're able to turn over their endowment to the strengthening of other local Friends' groups and designate it for the support of additional joint efforts between Purple and Green Yearly Meetings.

Another five years go by, and it's now considered normal for groups in the two yearly meetings to collaborate. Most of the teens and young adults don't remember a time when it was any other way. Coral Friends Meeting is a new worshiping group that springs up on Zoom on Tuesday nights. They decide to dual-affiliate with Green Yearly Meeting and Purple Yearly Meeting. Two years after that,

Tangerine Prison Worship Group does the same, as does Carrot Monthly Meeting, which has formed in an assisted living facility.

After another five years, which is only sixteen years after Lavender Friends Church started to reach out for help, Purple and Green Yearly Meetings merge—and thanks to the contagious culture of working together, there's a very real possibility that Polka Dot Yearly Meeting will also join in within the next ten years or so.

Commit to covenant, and institutions will follow. If you're wanting the short version, here's what I think it looks like:

- Decide that other Friends are mostly good people, and if you've heard otherwise, check it out for yourself.
- Make it normal to work together across institutional boundaries. Worship and listen to God together, too.
- Prioritize relationship over comfort (which is not the same thing as never saying no).

I do not believe the story I've told above is a fantasy. I believe this is what could happen if we decided to be in covenant, regardless of what the institutional structures tell us.

Principles Over Practices

Teach Quaker theology as distinct from institutional practices.

I've written before about religious education and its role in covenant community, but I think there's something more specific to be said about the difference between principles and practices. A lot of Friends' communities have no formalized religious education at all, but if we do, it tends to be sketchy and meandering for children and very much focused on practices for adults. This molds us into a people with little understanding of our own theology, so focused on practices as a unifying force that we become incapable of change.

My early experiences as a participant in Quaker adult religious education fell into two categories. Sometimes we were presented with a topic or query and everyone went around and shared their own thinking about it. No one position was articulated over another, which was a well-meaning attempt at equality but resulted in the impression that there's no such thing as Quaker theology—which isn't true. Actually, our ancestors have spent centuries collectively discerning and testing our theology. When we talk about continuing revelation as meaning that Quakers can believe anything, we wrongly imply that truth is relative and unknowable. That undermines the foundation of our faith. If there is no real truth, why attempt to discern it? If God's word changes so much that each generation's understandings are irrelevant to those in the future, why listen at all?

The other category of adult religious education I experienced was “how we do things.” This is what a nominating committee is, this is what a business meeting is, this is what a meeting for worship is, this is what the yearly meeting does. We always focused on how, on policy and procedures, on things that can be observed by watching. On the rare occasions that we shifted to why we do things, we went

back to a worship sharing or conversational format. Everybody offered their own reasons why, and no particular reason was given as the real one.

We approach things this way partly out of habit and partly fear. Many of us have never seen or heard of Quakerism taught any other way. “It’s an experiential tradition,” we’re told. “You learn the spiritual principles by living them.” Clearly, though, we do not learn the spiritual principles thoroughly by living them, because we all come to different conclusions about what they are. We need to put words on the experience. We need to study the teachings of our ancestors and engage in legitimate corporate discernment about how we describe the experiences today. We seem to fear making any absolute statements about Quaker theology because surely those would leave somebody out. And they *would* leave somebody out. That’s how shared understandings work. If we try to be everything for everybody, we become nothing for anybody.

In fact, no group can exist without some kind of unifying force. That’s a simple sociological fact. When Quakers say that we do not have a shared theology—which is true in many modern Quaker communities but not true from an historical perspective—we end up using our practices as our unifying force. And these tend to be surface-level practices, like shaking hands at the end of meeting for worship or the second hymn always being sung by the choir or donating the exact same amount to Friends United Meeting and Friends General Conference or approving action minutes in the course of the business meeting.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with doing any of these things. But if those practices become the definition of our community, the actual unifying force, then we are in a terrible position—because that means any institutional change is experienced as a threat to the community itself. Someone proposes that we high five each other at the end of meeting for worship instead of shaking hands, and all hell breaks loose...and that’s only a slightly exaggerated example. To build our community on a shared set of institutional practices is the very definition of building one’s house on sand.

We absolutely must know why we do things, the underlying principles on which we base our practice. We must know it because the winds and the floods are coming. We need firm principles in place so that we can adjust our practices as needed, to give us the necessary agility to adapt to a rapidly shifting world. Otherwise, every time we try to restructure a committee or alter the budget or push meeting for worship back two hours, we collectively act as though we’re changing something fundamental to our identity. This slows us down and makes it impossible to respond in a timely fashion to anything. Our surface-level practices are only meant to be how we manifest, for now, the principles at the heart of our community.

Teach Quaker theology as distinct from institutional practices. Put simply, but not easily, I think that looks like:

- Reminding ourselves of the spiritual principles our ancestors have passed down to us.
- Spending time in our communities understanding and teaching why we act as we do—the spiritual reasons, not the logistical ones.

- Working to understand and articulate the difference between the principles God asks us to live by (which are foundational) and the institutional practices that help us do that (which can change).

It's not that institutional practices don't matter at all. They certainly matter; if we all decided tomorrow to ignore them and go about doing things willy-nilly, that would cause chaos. But when we confuse those practices with eternal principles, we are putting our trust and our hope in the wrong things.

Pouring Into People

Pour love and resources into people.

I want to talk about five different ways we can do this.

#1 - Affirming spiritual gifts. Communities are designed to be interdependent, and part of practicing this interdependence is recognizing and nurturing what each person brings. Our giftedness is extraordinarily variable, and I've written about it extensively in the past, but the thing is, many people aren't aware of their own spiritual gifts. It tends to be easy to recognize the gifts we don't have. We witness other people being capable of things we aren't, and that feels like a deficit. On the other hand, our own spiritual gifts often come so naturally to us that we think, "Surely everyone can do these things."

For that reason, there's real value in the deliberate naming and nurturing of gifts. Doing so helps people shift from a feeling of "I can't" to "I can." It also helps us see other people's giftedness, including the giftedness of people we have difficulty getting along with. This is no magic wand to congeniality, but it can at least give us a place of gratitude to lean on when that person is doing that really annoying thing yet again.

Affirming spiritual gifts, and nurturing giftedness, also helps us become more flexible about what kinds of contributions our community sees as valuable. Over time, we naturally broaden our understanding of service to the community, and we recognize and appreciate the many contributions that don't get written down on nominations lists.

#2 - Loving the people we have. When people ask me what I learned from my days as a theatrical stage manager, I often say, "I learned to work with the people I had, not the people I wished I had." For example, I often found myself supervising run crews that were primarily composed of sixteen-to-nineteen-year-old boys. The first time I worked with such a crew, I expected responsible, organized, professional conduct and got angry when that wasn't what I received—because in my mind, responsible and organized and professional was the ideal description of a run crew, and if they weren't that when they were hired, it was their job to become it. But later on, I learned to recognize my young coworkers as humorous, energetic, and malleable, and guess what? That also makes a pretty good run crew. I just needed to treat them differently...more organizational support, better jokes, and occasional Ring Pops.

Silly as that example might seem, we Friends can do very similar things. It's so easy to be overwhelmed by the pressure of a nominating list with too many blanks, and we find ourselves putting

people into positions in which they can't succeed. But it doesn't have to be that way. If the people we have don't match our systems, we need to change the systems, not the people. There's a difference between the opportunity to grow and a job that crushes us because it's the wrong match. I don't think any institutional structure is important enough to sacrifice human beings for it.

#3 - Training our workers to a level of confident competence. This is connected to the ideas above, but it isn't the same. Friends have a long history of do-it-ourselves-ism, and we have sound theological reasons for this. Early Friends were pushing back against the idea that a seminary education qualified a person to be a minister of the gospel. We said that actual qualification came from God, not the seminary. Which is true. But early Friends also studied the Bible intensely, and later, they invested time and energy in training ministers, elders, and overseers. They recognized spiritual giftedness from childhood and nurtured gifts in young or convinced Friends.

Today, we tend to skip over this part. We ask Friends to serve as treasurers, trustees, ministry and counsel members, property committee clerks, and so forth but ignore the fact that nomination does not endow a person magically with training. Yes, we can do these things ourselves, and yes, we can grow into the roles, but some of these roles require particular knowledge, and this knowledge is not acquired mysteriously. It is expertise that's learnable if we provide training. Treasurers need bookkeeping; trustees, non-profit law; ministry and counsel members, understanding of addiction and family dynamics and available social services. When we do not train Friends serving in crucial positions, we leave them to acquire the training themselves (which most either can't or don't do) or to do their jobs incompletely, which is harmful to the whole community...those being served, and those who are serving.

We've spent several decades in the rather awkward position of not being able to provide such training. Individual local meetings and even yearly meetings often don't have the knowledge or resources to make this happen, but we haven't had many other options available, aside from offering the occasional weekend retreat. (There've been good efforts from time to time. Three cheers for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, for example. Their pastoral care newsletter is one of the best training resources I've ever seen. It was published from 1993-2012, and nearly all of the issues are still available in an online archive.)

Luckily, today, no Quaker institution has to do this training by itself. Modern technology makes it possible to collaborate in all kinds of ways. We need to take advantage of this. We need to coordinate efforts in getting the expertise from the people who have it to the people who need it.

#4 - Practicing conflict. Here's one type of training that everyone needs, but it's not best done in a two-hour one-time Zoom workshop. Conflict is hard because the particular circumstances surrounding each conflict are always different and because there's so much inherent fear around it for so many of us. For me, the fear is that the other person will be angry with me, will yell at me, will spread rumors about me. I also have a lot of fear around the possibility that I've made a mistake, that I am in some way a fundamentally bad person.

We tell ourselves all kinds of stories about why we shouldn't engage in conflict. *It's impolite. If we ignore it, it'll go away. There's no hope in the situation changing, anyway. Conflict just hurts people.*

But the truth is, burying conflict also hurts people, and if we engage in conflict lovingly and skillfully, we are very likely to find a constructive way forward. Ignored, it almost never goes away.

I've learned about conflict as elders have walked alongside me. They've helped me understand how to separate my feelings from the situation that's causing them, how to listen for another perspective, how to apologize for mistakes I've made without believing that mistakes make me a terrible person. Unlike non-profit law or Microsoft Excel, practicing conflict really must be taught in the moment, and by people with well-developed gifts in spiritual accompaniment. But it's essential to authentic covenant community, because with community will always come conflict.

#5 - Raising up ministries. By this, I mean all of them. There've been stirrings of emphasis on individual ministries in the past few years among some Friends, especially ministries that are primarily internal to the Religious Society of Friends. But limiting ourselves to just those ministries is incomplete. There are many Friends carrying outward-facing ministries, though most have never been labeled as such, and there are also community ministries in which whole groups are involved, like shelters and food pantries and international missions.

I find the word "ministry" to be a useful label, but I'm not attached to the vocabulary. What I'm talking about is the act of recognizing what God is calling Friends to do in the world. We emphasize listening to Spirit and discernment but then sometimes fail to take the next natural step, which is affirming the results of that deep listening. There are lots of ways to provide such affirmation: clearness committees, spiritual support, prayer partners, financial assistance. Primarily, it's about teaching ourselves and one another to expect God to call us into things and to rely on one another for support when that happens.

As important as institutional structures are, they can't make up for not *pouring love and resources into people*. They do not function in abstractions. They function in communities, specifically our communities of humans, and even the best institutional structures can only function as well as the people in them do. So one more time, I think the essential pieces are these:

- Affirming spiritual gifts;
- Loving the people we have;
- Training our workers to a level of competent confidence;
- Practicing conflict;
- And raising up ministries.

The more we pour love and resources into people, the more alive with Spirit our people will be...and the more ready we'll be, as a whole Society, to step into those places where God is calling us.

Practical Care and Eldership

Strengthen the functions of practical care and eldership as necessary foundations for healing and transformation.

I know from experience that God can heal and transform. When we are hurting, God can bring us through it, and long practice of spiritual disciplines often leads to spiritual transformation as well. I've

heard it said that coming to a Quaker community can bring us through phases—first safety, then healing, then transformation. And I know this to be true. It roughly describes my own experience.

Some Friends have found it sufficient to show up for worship every Sunday and wait in the presence of the Light, and they have experienced spiritual transformation. But I strongly suspect such Friends are rare. Most of us need one-on-one attention, some form of spiritual accompaniment by human beings over a long period of time.

People who do spiritual accompaniment work might be called elders. That's what we called them historically. In some places, Quakers today are reclaiming the word "elder" and its original meaning. In other places, Friends use the word to mean something different or don't include it in their vocabulary at all. In an ideal world, the historical-type elder takes care of the spiritual condition of the group and the individuals within it. Eldering done well is a Spirit-led, two-way conversation with deep listening in which an elder brings a person closer to the fulness of their spiritual potential. It happens in the context of loving relationship and can look like encouragement, comfort, offering questions for reflection, and (when appropriate) holding someone accountable in a loving and respectful manner.

I've had extraordinary experiences of being elderd by people who cared about my spiritual growth. These elders had the right gifts to ask good questions and reflect my own statements back to me. They helped me process and make meaning of experiences I'd had, both in worship and in relationships with people. They also supported me in taking baby steps into mysticism, which is not necessarily a function of all elders but was important in my case because the ethereal did not come naturally to me.

Strong elders can be an enormous part of spiritual formation and preparation for (and support during) spiritual transformation. But strong, skilled, well-practiced elders are sometimes hard to find. That's because most branches of Friends have long-since stopped recording elders. As a reminder, the act of recording is the act of writing something down that God has already made true. So in theory, not recording shouldn't stop us from having elders—but it does. I don't believe for a minute that God has stopped making elders. But we, as a Society, have stopped looking for them. Because we don't record them or name them, we don't make a regular practice of noticing them. And elders, like the rest of us, do not spring forth with gifts fully developed. They need nurture and practice and guidance from more experienced elders.

How do we recognize an immature elder, one whose gifts might need developing? They're often observing the dynamics of the group. Some are too quick to articulate these and might come across as bossy, while others are slow to speak, never sharing what they're seeing. They might be drawn to worship, showing up early or staying late. They might be the people that others tend to go to for advice. They might be prayer warriors or unusually insightful in conversation. They might be much more concerned with the wellbeing of everyone present than they are about whether the project at hand gets done. They're likely to do a lot of spiritual care for the community whether we affirm them or not—but like all of us, they'll likely fulfill their potential more quickly if noticed and nurtured.

I'm grateful that many Friends have started paying attention to the role of elders again. But there's another piece here that is often overlooked, and that's the role of the overseers.

I won't use the word "overseers" after this paragraph because of its association with slavery. Friends' use of the word had a different definition and became part of the lexicon separately, but that other definition is still sharply present in many Friends' minds, so we intentionally don't use the word today. But I had to use it once to explain what I mean because our language has no direct synonym. Like the word "minister" and the word "elder," the word "overseer" was used to designate the essence of a person (who God had created them to be) rather than a role they were taking on temporarily (a human construct).

We need a new word for this. The role I'm talking about is a person who looks after the practical needs of Friends. This person makes sure that everyone in the community has food and clean water and schooling for their children. This person visits those who are imprisoned or sick or, at the very least, coordinates members of the meeting to do so.

Friends have fallen out of the habit of doing this for one another. Those of us in North America and Europe live in societies where Quakers are no longer oppressed, which means we have the same access to government social services that others do, and with the exception of dropping off casseroles after surgery, we often don't pay much attention to material needs. I suspect this is preventing the spiritual growth of our community in ways that are difficult for us to see. Despite the stories the world tells about long-suffering faithful people, it's actually quite difficult to focus on spiritual transformation when you don't know where your kids' dinner is coming from. This may be part of why so many meetings are composed of middle- and upper-class people...because we're ignoring the condition of anyone who's not.

When we do provide financial support for community members who are struggling, we do it confidentially. This is a tricky point because asking for financial help often does feel embarrassing—but keeping things confidential also means the need isn't known, and we as a community never develop the habit of supporting each other's material needs. What if sharing our excess income were just normal? I know of places in East Africa where Friends often can't meet the material needs of all their members, even when starvation is eminent. But if money does appear for emergency food, they know exactly which families need it most because they've made a habit of being familiar with one another's condition. What can the rest of us learn from them?

It's worth noting, I think, that this type of person, simply because of the kinds of things they'd be paying attention to and the relationships they'd have, would also be well-placed to notice problems with addiction or abuse dynamics. Right now, who's well-positioned for that? What might be different if we had someone?

How would we recognize a person called to this type of caregiving, if we were paying attention and looking for them? I suspect such people are perceptive and organized, capable of speaking calmly and providing help in a way that feels relatively easy to accept. I think they're probably good with vulnerability and have a sense of the inherent dignity of every person. They'd be strong advocates, patient but steadfast, and extremely consistent, with authentic loving care for the people in the community.

If our meetings and churches are going to be spiritually transformational, we must *strengthen the functions of practical care and eldership, because these are the necessary foundations for healing and transformation*. We can:

- Look around for the Friends who are demonstrating that they carry the right gifts for spiritual nurture or practical care;
- Affirm these Friends and encourage them to do the work they feel called to do, not expecting them to be perfect right away because they, like everyone, need opportunities to develop their gifts;
- And talk about these roles openly as vital to our communities.

God can do extraordinary things, but we know from experience that God's miracles usually happen through the faithfulness of human beings. We need to pay attention to upholding those who are called to do such work.

Big Things

Reclaim the expectation that God will do big things.

If you haven't spent four successive business meetings discussing paint colors, you're either a new Quaker or you've been very lucky. Modern Friends tend to go round and round about very small things. Our tendency to create committees and then not trust them means that we spend a lot of time second-guessing. Are we certain that God wants the benches painted sky blue? It possible that God actually prefers azure?

I'm not prepared to assert that things used to be better, exactly. I'm pretty sure Friends have been through multiple historical periods of debating minor details, whether obscure points of theology or what precisely defines an overly ostentatious hat. But we've also, sometimes, managed to take part in—even leadership of—fairly significant historical movements, and some Friends still do. Why aren't we all doing that?

One stumbling block has a lot to do with paint colors. I'm honestly offended by the idea that the creator of the universe would fret about the color of our benches while families are starving and children are killed as bystanders in war. Which is not to say that we can, or even should, devote our entire lives to the world's most tragic crises. We humans are not designed for that, and I believe God delights when we are happy. God does care about our individual lives from day to day, even in the face of tragedies elsewhere. God's probably even on board with our having pretty benches. I just don't think God calls us to take our time in corporate discernment—which is meant to be about listening to the Holy Spirit's leadings for our lives—and give it over exclusively to our own (often fairly minor) internal concerns.

God can do great big things through Friends. I think about kindertransport, for example, or women's suffrage in the United States—not that we managed these things alone, but we played a significant part, even disproportionate for our numbers. The world is still in need of such initiatives, and where are we? Friends make a distinction between a concern and a leading, between a problem we

recognize prophetically and what, if anything, we might be called to do to address it. I'm not suggesting that we try to do everything or even that we attempt anything we aren't legitimately called to do.

What we can do is change our expectations.

If we, as communities, really expect that God will call us into big things, then we will approach our discernment much differently. We'll be less inclined to fuss about comparatively minor issues. We'll delegate routine work to individuals or small groups and then trust them to do it, and we'll spend more time paying attention to what's happening outside our meetinghouse walls. There'll be more intervisitation and travel in ministry, more ecumenical and interfaith cooperation, and more focus on clearness committees and teaching about leadings.

We often joke about the slowness of Quaker process, but if we're honest, it isn't funny. Proceeding slowly is perfectly appropriate if we're slow because we're responding to God's time, but not if we're allowing our own preferences, opinions, and egos to inflate the importance of relatively small questions. How often, in a meeting for business about paint colors, do we stop and breathe and ask ourselves whether God is actually prompting us to speak about which shade of blue is best? Perhaps I'm an exception, but that has not been my experience of God. Sometimes it's okay to just make a quick decision. Doing that is not leaving people out or doing away with Quaker process. It is making space for ourselves to find sense of the meeting about things we feel pretty sure God cares deeply about.

I've heard it said that Friends make all decisions together, even simple ones, as a way of showing care for the community. This may be our intent, but I don't think the practice suits that purpose very well. This idea ignores the people who leave our community because they feel we're wasting time. It also directly prevents us from having time and energy to step into bigger things, which inhibits spiritual growth for everyone.

Reclaim the expectation that God will do big things. Our expectations directly influence our behavior, which is why they matter so much. To broaden our expectations, we can:

- Tell the stories of times when God has called our community to do something big, especially if there are living Friends in the meeting who remember these things. A good friend of mine once told me, "We don't usually experience a call to something we've never heard of and can't imagine." And this is true. We need examples.
- Talk together about what you wish you had more time and energy for as a meeting. Remembering that a concern is not the same as a leading (and that no group of Friends will be called to fix everything), find ways to make more space for deep listening on big questions.
- Experiment with ways of delegating routine decisions to individuals or small groups. Expect this to feel hard. It will require more trust and less control than we're accustomed to. Check in with each other to see how it feels.

My yearly meeting's *Faith and Practice* has a number of different terms for unprogrammed worship. My favorite is "expectant worship." Whether programmed or unprogrammed, worship is different when we enter it prepared for God to do something big. By changing what we look for, I believe we can change what we find.

Making Mistakes

Reject perfectionism and make mistakes.

In some ways, this sounds like such a small thing. I think it's essential, though, if we are ever going to change.

Suppose we're designing a new system for approving budgets. That's not too far-off a thought experiment; many of us are doing this very thing right now. We know that God calls us to listen for a leading. So we do. We enter a process of corporate discernment, in which we expect to hear Spirit's prompting. A committee brings an initial proposal. One Friend speaks approvingly but has a couple reservations. Another speaks and suggests a minor change. A third likes what the first Friend said but not the second. An hour later—sometimes a day later, or even a week later—we still haven't found a sense of the meeting. Or perhaps we can approve part one (but not part two), plus most of part three (but not sub-section D), only the proposal falls apart without sub-section D, and three Friends have process questions because who gave the committee permission to even develop this proposal?

I used to really struggle with this. I'd get so annoyed with all the objections. Except, of course, if I was one of the Friends who *had* objections, in which I was sure that my thing was important. And I'd feel like getting it right was absolutely vital. We're literally listening for the will of God. What if we screw it up by not trying hard enough?

It was not until a few years ago that I realized God doesn't usually send us annotated outlines. God's guidance almost never comes in three parts and multiple, well-organized sub-sections, even if our budgetary processes do require such things. God's immediate contribution is often as simple as, "Yo, the way you're doing budgets is unjust and you should check that out."

If we were supposed to follow a precise detailed plan, perhaps God would engrave directions in stone. Or maybe God would just download a spreadsheet and get it over with. I have yet to see God doing either of these things.

We worry a lot about sub-section D. I wonder what happens if we decline to worry. I wonder what happens if we try sub-section D as an experiment. Maybe we put the policy in place for a year. Then we reevaluate. It might work great. It also might be barely adequate, but we might discover that barely adequate is sufficient. Or it might be disastrous—in which case we've learned stuff.

I was once in a meeting trying to explain why I find grants so hard to apply for. It's because the way I approach work among Friends is so often experimental. "In the course of a year," I said, "I think about thirty-six possible projects. I'll try eighteen, and six will flop totally. Of the remaining twelve, eight will be fine, and four will be amazing. But I don't know which four!" Change is about failing, and you have to fail fast. If you don't, you don't have time to fail enough. Because the four major successes have the actual impact, but the other thirty-two ideas are the ones that you learn from. That's how you find more possibilities for next year.

This way of existing did not come naturally to me. My perfectionist streak is a mile wide. But I've learned over time that *not* aiming to be perfect almost always turns out to have better results.

The Kingdom of God on Earth requires permission to fail. If it didn't, that would mean that no one ever did anything they weren't perfectly ready to do. No attempt at justice unless we can do it perfectly. No attempt at peace-making unless we can do it perfectly. No attempt to be generous unless we can do it perfectly. What kind of Kingdom of God is that?

Perfectionism isn't a virtue, it's a temptation. It actively prevents us from trying big things. A commitment to grow is a commitment to learn. That requires a commitment to making mistakes, with all the human messiness that is likely to result.

Reject perfectionism and make mistakes. In Quaker community, I suspect that looks like:

- Asking for the essence of God's call (the why) rather than expecting explicit instructions (a detailed how).
- Trying some stuff to figure out what works.
- Forgiving ourselves and one another when we (inevitably) mess things up.

This is hard. It's hard because it requires mutual trust. It's also hard because we've grown so accustomed to being safe, since our corporate discernment process lets us say "no" until we are totally sure about "yes." But unless we believe God sends detailed outlines, then what we're doing in that kind of perfectionism discernment is giving ourselves excuses *not* to be faithful. And I don't believe God sends detailed outlines. Because God wants us to grow and learn, and we don't do that by following directions. We do that by having experiences. Sometimes experiences that don't go well.

The Movement

Lean into the movement, for which the institution is the launching pad.

Most Friends I know are deeply concerned about the condition of the world. Some are intensely engaged in peace work, climate justice, human rights advocacy, and much more. We take on these tasks as individual Friends in our paid professions, in our volunteer work, and in our community organizing. We donate to relevant non-profit groups, and we use our social media platforms to encourage other people to engage.

But something seems different about this work when it comes to our Quaker institutions. This whole category—which we sometimes name as "witness"—feels restrained. There are some profound examples of local meetings or yearly meetings taking effective action in these areas, but the examples are rare. More often, our local and yearly meetings write and approve minutes. We send letters to representatives. We hold discussion groups about particular concerns. All of these are positive steps, but they aren't anything like the stories we tell ourselves about our histories, the days when we organized mass movements to intervene in the wider society.

Some Friends' groups do take significant witness-related action. But they generally function outside our traditional local-regional-yearly-umbrella discernment relationship structures. I'm talking about groups such as American Friends Service Committee, Friends Peace Teams, Right Sharing of World Resources, and many more. Partly because of this outside-ness, there is sometimes a sense of tension between these institutions and Friends generally. There tends to be a slight suspicion: how

Quaker are these organizations, really? Are they truly Friends' organizations if they aren't directly subject to the discernment of local-regional-yearly-umbrella meetings?

To get a better grip on all this, I've been trying to understand *why* the Quaker world developed this way, without making judgments about what is good or bad. Why are individual Friends often engaged in witness work that is not perceived as integrated in their Quaker meetings, even though many Friends so engaged would identify their work as a leading of Spirit? Why are the Quaker groups that do the most consistent and impactful witness-type work not directly under the care of Quaker meetings?

I think what's happened is a series of institutional dominos, which have tumbled over in succession in a period of many decades. The state of witness in the Quaker world today might have developed as an adaptation in response to systemic problems in our institutions. Some of this is conjecture on my part, but I think understanding the story might help us know better what to do next, so I'm going to tell it as best I can.

As I've said before, early Friends organized themselves into monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings primarily because it was a system that worked. They knew that they needed corporate discernment, sometimes with larger-than-local groups, but the only way to do that pre-internet was in person, and there was only so far that Friends could reasonably ride a horse.

So small, medium, and large geographic groups were designated and connected in a web-like fashion. Then, traveling ministers went from one to the next as a sort of circulatory system. In these early days, no one would have imagined separating the concept of "ministry" from the concept of "witness." All came from the same Source. All was meant to build the Kingdom of God on Earth. There was no notable difference between Friends who traveled in ministry among Quakers and Friends who traveled in ministry among other groups of people. Today, we might roughly categorize these earlier traveling ministers into groups: evangelists, witnesses/activists, and preachers. But many Friends functioned as all three, and they themselves did not perceive a difference.

In time, and for various reasons, we shifted from a model of recording ministers (and elders and overseers) to a committee structure in which Friends were nominated to serve in particular positions. This committee structure, among other things, changed the way in which we give and receive trust to do work on behalf of Friends. Friends who are recorded are given considerable freedom to minister as led. There is accountability, but this accountability comes after the fact, when Friends might intervene because a minister has outrun their Guide.

But Friends serving on committees are only allowed to do things that their committee descriptions say they may. If they are feeling led to do more, they must bring that leading back to the full group and ask for the discernment of the whole before moving forward. This is often difficult to attain. The discernment procedures may take a long time, and Friends may say no because the proposal is "not how we do things." Or we may wordsmith the idea endlessly or decline because we fear not having sufficient resources. Sometimes we say no because we believe we must wait for a perfect proposal.

These dynamics tend to prevent Friends led to witness from being able to take big steps within the context of our committee systems, which is the only way—in most cases—that work among Friends

can be “officially” part of our meetings. Therefore, many Friends engage in witness work through other channels, including community organizations and employment. They themselves know they’re acting under spiritual concern, but those around them may not. This also means, in most cases, that such Friends less likely to be financially and spiritually supported by their Quaker communities. Not because the work isn’t deserving of support but because there are few official channels available in our institutions for affirming such work.

Then, on the wider-than-individuals scale, most of our large Quaker witness organizations have been founded externally to our local-regional-yearly-umbrella institutions. Why? Because—as far as I can see—between the limitations of our committee structures and the divisions between many yearly meetings, there hasn’t been much choice. Friends have not been capable of affirming or caring for such institutions within our own structures, so Friends led to start such organizations do so outside those structures.

But then, because the witness organizations are not contained within our formal structures, there are no automatic pathways for funding, spiritual relationship, and corporate discernment. When Friends ask why a yearly meeting might automatically contribute to, and send representatives to, an umbrella organization (such as Friends World Committee for Consultation or Friends United Meeting) but not a witness organization, this is why. It is not because Friends believe the work of umbrella organizations to be more important than the work of witness organizations. It is because the relationship is fundamentally different. Umbrella organizations are part of our formal institutional relationships centered in corporate discernment, and witness organizations are not.

In other words, as far as I can tell, we first made it nearly impossible to do witness work within our systemic structures, then declined to support it because it wasn’t happening within our systemic structures.

What a mess.

Is this the way we believe things should be? If not, we’re going to have to take some specific steps to change things, and that’s going to be tricky because they’re the kind of steps that our institutions are specifically designed to discourage.

First, we’ll need to shift our perspectives on leadings and spiritual gifts. As long as formal committees and working groups, which are usually internally focused, are the primary form of service (or ministry) that we recognize, we’ll be holding back Friends whose calls to ministry are externally focused. The work of caring for one another is divine, as is the work of administration within our institutions, but it’s not the only work to which Friends are called and mustn’t be treated as such.

Second, we’ll need to experiment with explicit affirmation for outward facing ministries—for the activists, the witnesses, the advocates, the peacemakers. That might be recording, or travel minutes, or support committees, or some new form altogether. But we must find a reliable pathway by which such Friends can access spiritual and practical support.

And third, we’ll need to take a look at our covenant community and ask ourselves: does it include the externally structured witness organizations? As I’ve said before, there is nothing that can be done through formal paperwork or legal institutional ties that can either establish or sever covenant

relationship. Our covenant relationships happen when we give ourselves to God and God, in turn, gives us to a group of people. Does that group of people include those working in the witness organizations?

If it does, then we need to discern how that covenant relationship calls us into action. That might include engaging in intervisitation with witness organizations, participating in their ministries, signing up for their newsletters, providing financial support, taking the discernment of the witness organizations into prayer as topics for our local and yearly meetings to consider, rejoicing in the success stories of the work of witness organizations, and trusting in Friends' ability to discern the will of God within those organizations even though their discernment is not formally connected to Friends' broader corporate discernment systems. In other words, we can assume that we are on the same team and working together despite the absence of formal institutional channels connecting us.

The spiritual practice of worship is not self-contained. It is the beginning, we hope, of spiritual transformation, which develops corporately into testimonies, which are not beliefs but ways by which we live our lives. Witness is an inevitable fruit of faithful listening, and the ways in which we will be called to witness are not predictable or easily contained. The living of testimonies in this world is the Quaker movement of which some Friends speak, and it's distinct from our institutions—but if we're deliberate in our practices, those institutions can propel the movement just as effectively as they can hold it back.

Lean into the movement, for which the institution is the launching pad. In practice, as simply as possible, I think it looks like this:

- Talk about witness as an inevitable fruit of Quaker practice.
- When Friends are called to witness, treat this call as ministry, which means spiritual support and accountability and practical assistance.
- Despite the historical separateness (which we can't go back and change now anyway), treat Friends' witness organizations as part of our wider covenant relationships.

In other words, lean into the movement that is already happening. If we step up to support those Friends who are already called and responding to that call, I suspect the movement itself will increase.

The Manifestation of Quakerism

Plant, combine, simplify, and lay down institutions to meet the changing needs of the covenant community.

Why do Quaker institutions exist at all? To support the covenant community, to make it easier for Friends to discern the will of God and then act on it. Without the institution, we have to figure out all of the logistics every time. We can't do that long-term. We need communications mechanisms, common practices, and financial channels. We need record-keeping, expertise, and people with the legal authority to sign contracts. And so we need institutions.

The best thing about institutions is that they perpetuate patterns. And the worst thing about institutions is that they perpetuate patterns. The institution is so powerful that if we aren't conscious of

its power we can easily let its systems take over. Without pushback, the institution's momentum will do this.

What the institution cannot do unaided is adapt. The covenant community changes all the time. It changes because human beings change. It changes, more importantly, because the world changes and because what God calls us to do shifts accordingly. This is when we must decide: do we adjust our institutions to support the new community, or do we adjust God's call to fit within the institutions? If we do not decide, the institution takes precedence by default.

All of our Quaker institutions exist for a reason. Every local meeting, regional meeting, yearly meeting, umbrella organization, witness organization, school, university, retirement community, and mission...they all began because the covenant community had a need for them. But today, in many cases, the historical reason no longer exists—or if it does still exist, then the original institution may not still serve the purpose it originally did. This is why so many of our meetings and organizations are struggling. We are pouring our energy, our passion, and our money into keeping them open because *we believe the institution is the manifestation of Quakerism*. It is not. The covenant community is.

So what do we do with these struggling institutions? We listen. It is always possible to hear God's guidance, if we are prepared to listen faithfully. And then—I believe that some of our meetings and organizations need to be laid down. The society around us tells us that more is better and that endings like these represent a failure, but I do not believe that to be true. When the covenant community is devoting its energy to supporting the institution, instead of vice-versa, we've entered a dynamic that is backwards and unhealthy. To lay down an institution does not mean it has not mattered. It means that it has mattered enormously. That institution has supported us until we have reached another place—and now, God has a calling that is new.

Other meetings and organizations aren't ready to be laid down, but they're operating in ways that are no longer appropriate. They may be overly complex, or too big, or too small. Perhaps we still need the meeting, but not the building. Perhaps we still need the local meeting and yearly meeting, but not the region. Perhaps it's time for two or more yearly meetings to combine. We're unlikely to manage such changes if we take them on as a purely practical matter, but if we focus on the covenant community, the institutions will more naturally follow. If we're coming from a place of "we must change this because we can't keep the institution going," then we're coming from a place of scarcity and we're also giving the institution primary importance. But if we're coming from a place of "this change is how we can live into God's call for our covenant community," then we're coming from a place of abundant expectation and giving the community primary importance.

I really believe that God is reshaping the Religious Society of Friends. So many new forms are rising, and so many new Friends are experiencing calls. It is happening so fast that we are having trouble responding to it. This is natural. Humans are notoriously poor at perceiving change, and again, the act of adapting to change means pushing against the momentum of our institutions. But we can do it, if we're willing to release some spiritual energy—that is, to redirect some of what's currently being used to feed our old institutions. Simplifying, combining, and laying down is the motion that will make it possible to plant and nurture whatever new institutions will be needed. This is our path toward resurrection.

What is new will not be the same as what was old. I hope we'll continue to draw from the wisdom of our ancestors, and there are some truths we've found that I don't believe will change. But no one knows—except perhaps God—what kind of institutions Friends will require to meet our call in the coming years. What I do know is that we must take a serious look at our institutions...and cultivate a willingness to change them or even end them, for the sake of supporting what is more important.

Looking around at the condition of Quaker institutions, I discover Isaiah 43:19 echoing in my head: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” God is doing a new thing, but we do not perceive it if all our attention is focused on maintaining the old ways.

We aren't dying. We're changing. When I consider the condition of the Quaker covenant community, it's a different Bible verse that comes to mind: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’” I've always rejoiced in finding this verse in the midst of the book of Jeremiah, which has to be one of the most depressing texts ever written. And yet, in all that, the Lord reaffirms: *plans to give you hope and a future*. For us Friends, too, I believe.