

The Light Within

The Light Within is the fundamental and immediate experience for Friends. It is that which guides each of us in our everyday lives and brings us together as a community of faith. It is, most importantly, our direct and unmediated experience of the Divine.

Friends have used many different terms or phrases to designate the source and inner certainty of our faith—a faith which we have gained by direct experience. The Inward Light, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Spirit of Truth, the Divine Principle, the Christ Within, the Seed, and the Inner Light are examples of such phrases. George Fox refers in his Journal to “that Inward Light, Spirit, and Grace by which all might know their salvation” and to “that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth.” He wrote: “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition” and encouraged Friends “to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.” Many Friends interpret “that of God” as another designation for the Light Within.

For Friends, the Light Within is not the same as the conscience or moral faculty. The conscience is a human faculty, which is conditioned by education and the cultural environment; it is not, therefore, an infallible guide to moral practice. It should nevertheless be attended to, for it is one of the faculties through which the Light shines. Friends are encouraged to test the leadings of conscience by seeking clearness, through direct communion in the meeting for worship, and through the clearness process (see p. 29). Such testing enhances and clarifies insight so that the conscience may be purged of misconceptions and become more truly obedient to the Light Within. When conscience has been transformed by experiencing the Light, it gives more reliable direction even though it may seem to point in a direction that is contrary to generally accepted authorities.

Friends’ experience has been that following an enlightened conscience brings a release of the spirit and also a state of peace that are independent of the tangible results of the action taken. Spiritual power arises from living in harmony with the divine will. George Fox often spoke of the power he experienced in times of need, and of that relationship between power and the Light. For instance, he writes that “the power of God sprang

through me," and, he admonishes us, "hearken to the Light, that ye may feel the power of God in every one of you."

Continuing obedience to the Light increases our gratitude for God's gifts. Among these are an awareness of enduring values, the joy of life, and the ability to resolve problems in accord with divine leading, as individuals or as a Meeting. Under the guidance of the Light, the monthly meeting is enabled to use and transform the aspirations and judgments of its members. This practice helps the Meeting make decisions and face undertakings in a spirit detached from self-interest or prejudice. Basic Quaker testimonies such as equality, simplicity, nonviolence, integrity, and community have arisen from a deep sense of individual and corporate responsibility guided by the Light Within.

Recognizing that God's Light is in every person overcomes our separation and our differences from others and leads to a sympathetic awareness of their need and a sense of responsibility toward them. Friends believe that the more widely and clearly the Light is recognized and followed, the more will humanity come into accord. "Therefore," writes George Fox, "in the Light wait, where unity is."

Worship and the Meeting for Worship

The meeting for worship is the heart of the Religious Society of Friends. It draws us together in the enlightening and empowering presence of God, sending us forth with renewed vision and commitment.

WORSHIP

Our word "worship" has its roots in the concept of "worth-ship." Worship is our response to what we feel to be of ultimate importance. Our expression of that feeling of ultimate worthship may take many forms. Worship is always possible, alone or in company, in silence, in music or speech, in stillness or in dance. It is never confined to place or time or form.

When Friends worship, we reach out from the depths of our being to God, the giver of life and of the world around us. Our worship is the search for communion with God and the offering of ourselves—body and soul—for the doing of God's will. The sense of worship can be experienced in the awe we feel in the silence of a meeting for worship or in the awareness of our profound connectedness to nature and its power. In worship we know repentance and forgiveness in the acknowledgment of God as the ultimate

source of our being, and the serenity of accepting God's will.

In worship we discover direction for our lives and the uses of our resources. Leadings are often made clearer by reference to the life and teachings of Jesus and by the transforming power of the Inner Light. From worship there comes a fresh understanding of the two great commandments: to love "your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27).

Careful listening to the Inward Teacher can lead to fresh openings: an inpouring of love, insight, and interdependence. True listening can also bring the worshiper to new and sometimes troubling perceptions, including clear leadings that may be a source of pain and anxiety; yet it can also bring such wholeness of heart that hard tasks can become a source of joy. Even when we worship torn with our own pain or that of another, it is in worship that we discover new strength for what faces us in our everyday lives.

Each experience of worship is different. There is no right way to prepare for spiritual communion, no set practice to follow when worship grows from expectant waiting in the Spirit. Vital worship depends far more on a deeply felt longing for God than upon any particular practice. "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7)

THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP

Friends find it useful to come to meeting with hearts and minds prepared for worship by daily prayer, meditation, and study, especially of the Bible and of the experience of others. We deepen thereby our awareness of the wonder of God and of God's love, and acquire the words with which to understand and to express that awareness. Many also find help through thoughtful reflection and listening to the Inward Teacher in the course of daily life and service.

As Friends arrive for meeting, such preparation helps us set aside our preoccupation with ourselves and our affairs and so settle into worship in a manner described by Alexander Parker in 1660:

The first that enters into the place of your meeting ... turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit; and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure

stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light. Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the Spirit are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is spirit and in the spirit he is worshiped.

Worship in meeting may thus begin with stilling the mind and body, letting go of tensions and everyday worries, feeling the encompassing presence of others, and opening oneself to the Spirit. It may include meditation, reflection on a remembered passage from the Bible or other devotional literature, silent prayer, thanksgiving, praise of God, consideration of one's actions, remorse, request for forgiveness, or search for direction. Even in times of spiritual emptiness, Friends find it useful to be present in worship.

Worshipping together strengthens the members of the worshipping community and deepens the act of worship itself. Such communal worship is like a living organism whose individual but interdependent members are essential to one another and to the life of the greater whole. It is like the luminous unity and individual fulfillment that arise when musicians, responding to the music before them, offer up their separate gifts in concert. Friends sometimes use Paul's image and speak of the meeting for worship as a body whose head is Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). The gifts and participation of each member are important in maintaining and enriching the spiritual life of the meeting for worship.

There is a renewal of spirit when we turn away from worldly matters to rediscover inward serenity. Friends know from experience the validity of Jesus' promise that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). Often we realize our hopes for a heightened sense of the presence of God through the cumulative power of group worship, communicated in silent as well as vocal ministry. When we experience such a profound and evident sense of oneness with God and with one another, we speak of a "gathered" or "covered" meeting for worship.

Communion and Communication

Direct communion with God constitutes the essential life of the meeting for worship. Into its living stillness may come leadings and fresh insights that are purely personal, not meant to be shared. At other times they are meant for the Meeting at large to hear.

When a leading is to be shared, the worshiper feels a compelling inward call to vocal ministry. The very name "Quaker" is by tradition derived from the evident quaking of early Friends witnessing under the

power of the Spirit. Though ministry is seldom accompanied by such outward signs, some still feel the inward quaking. Vocal ministry may take many forms, as prayer, praise of God, song, teaching, witnessing, or sharing. These messages may center upon a single, vital theme; often apparently unrelated leadings are later discovered to have an underlying unity. Such ministry and prayer may answer the unrecognized or unvoiced needs of other seekers.

When someone accepts the call of the Spirit to speak, fellow worshipers are likewise called to listen with openness of minds and hearts. Diffident and tender spirits should feel the Meeting community's loving encouragement to give voice, even if haltingly, to the message that may be struggling to be born within them. Friends whose thought has been long developing and whose learning and experience are profound serve the meeting best when they, like all others, wait patiently for the prompting of the Inward Teacher. Anyone moved to speak following another should first allow others to absorb and respond inwardly to what has already been said.

Friends should not put obstacles in the way of the call, whether by deciding in advance to speak or not to speak, or by feeling a duty to speak to provide some balance between silence and the spoken word. Even if not a word is spoken, meetings for worship can be profoundly nurturing.

Hindrances to Worship

All present should remember that spiritual opportunities entail responsibilities as well, including attention to the time of assembling and consideration for those already settled. Speaking carried on in a spirit of debate or lecturing or discussion is destructive to the life of the meeting for worship and of the meeting community. It is rarely helpful to answer or rebut what has been said previously. Friends moved to vigorous support of causes need to find brief and sensitive ways to voice their insights. Similar sensitivity should be practiced by those who bring material to be posted or shared during worship. Any who habitually settle into silent reading or sit in inattentive idleness cut themselves off from their fellow worshipers and from the pervasive reach of the Spirit. If hindrances to worship occur within a meeting for worship, members of Worship and Ministry or others as appropriate should move quickly and in love to provide counsel.

In Closing

Friends gather for worship in quiet waiting upon God. We come together out of our care for one another and out of our shared hunger to know God, to follow the leading of the Spirit, to feel with clarity our shortcomings and the reality of forgiveness, to give voice to our anguish, faith, praise, joy, and thanksgiving. At the close of the meeting for worship, we shake hands in acknowledgment of our commitment to one another and to God, and go forth with renewed trust in the power and reality of God's grace and love.

Decision-Making

The presuppositions of the corporate meeting for worship have, from the very beginning, profoundly affected the method of decision-making in the meeting for business. In both, there is faith in the Guide. There is faith in a continuous revelation that is always open to produce fresh disclosures. And there is respect and affection for each other that cuts through all diversity and that helps to kindle a faith that, with patience and openness, the group can expect to come to clearness and to resolve the problems that come before it.

– Source unknown

From Faith Into Business

Friends' decision-making is rooted in the spiritual oneness of a religious community. We reject majority rule for the higher goal of reaching decisions in unity, through distinctive attitudes developed by Friends over the centuries. Our process is democratic in the sense that everyone is encouraged to participate. However, it also goes beyond democracy in that it does not rely solely on human will or ability. Participants are expected to put aside personal desires and allow themselves to be led by a Guide beyond the self.

When this decision-making process is used carelessly, its lack of formal rules of order can lead to abuse by neglect or by design. When used with care, it is deeply satisfying and produces practical decisions that are in harmony with the Spirit.

The act of choosing is inescapably religious, in that it reveals our fun-

damental values and deepest loyalties. Friends must therefore be rigorous in discerning the ultimate source of their leadings, always looking beyond the self, and never letting their own wills become a substitute for God.

The Religious Basis of Our Decision-Making

Despite the difference in format, meetings for business are meetings for worship in which our business is held and are conducted in the same openness to the leading of the Spirit. For our religious community to thrive, it is essential that we nurture our love for one another, maintain our spiritual unity, and live in harmony with the Spirit. These beliefs underlie every attitude and practice in our meetings for business.

As we wrestle with outward issues, the Inward Light gives us new perspectives and creative responses. On all matters, even the mundane, its presence promises a fresh revelation of truth and a clearer understanding of God's will.

It is also our experience that new openings to truth may come at any time and from any source. Each Friend should therefore listen to all efforts to express that truth, testing them against accumulated experience, the life and teachings of Jesus, and moral and spiritual guides in Scripture and elsewhere. Yet we are careful to rely not on the letter of the text, but to read as George Fox enjoined us to read the Scriptures: "in the Spirit in which they were given forth."

The Goal of Friends' Decision-making

The goal of Friends' decision-making is a Spirit-led sense of the meeting – a crystallization of the search for clarity on the topic under consideration. Even in the face of strong difference of opinion, that goal is achievable when there is spiritual unity.

Our search is for unity, not unanimity. We consider ourselves to be in unity when our search for Truth is shared; when our listening for God is faithful; when our wills are caught up in the presence of Christ; and when our love for one another is constant. A united meeting is not necessarily all of one mind, but it is all of one heart.

We believe that this unity, transcending apparent differences, springs from God's empowering love, and that a Meeting, trusting in the leadership of that love and gathered in its spirit, will enjoy unity in its search for truth.

A Meeting is a living spiritual entity which may encompass strong differences of opinion. It is like an individual who may have many

conflicting inclinations but who still has a final sense of how to act. The sense of the meeting is not designed and fitted together, but is conceived, born, and nurtured; the Meeting's care for the quality of its decision-making process is essential to the rightness of its decisions in the same way that an expectant mother's care for her own health is essential to the strength of her child.

Sense of the meeting is not synonymous with consensus. Consensus is a widely used and valuable secular process characterized by a search for general agreement largely through rational discussion and compromise. Sense of the meeting is a religious process characterized by listening for and trusting in God. Both result in a course of action agreed to by all of the participants, but the sense of the meeting relies consciously on the Spirit. Although reasoned argument and lively debate may often play a role in Friends' decision-making, they are useful only to the extent that they are the expressions of spiritual leadings.

When the sense of the meeting has been rightly discerned, those present will know that they have faithfully followed their Guide, and will feel a continued affection for each other.

Expectations of Participants

Among Friends, the decisions made by a group are enriched when all members commit themselves to regular attendance at meetings for worship as well as at decision-making sessions.

By maintaining a spirit of worship throughout the meeting, participants nurture their openness to the leadings of the Spirit and its gifts of trust, humility, compassion, and courage.

Although an individual Friend has the designated role of clerk, all share the responsibility for the maintenance of a Spirit-led gathering, for the wise use of time, and for a steadfast search for truth. All are expected to be attentive and to offer concisely such insight as each may have. None should remain silent in the belief that the conclusion is foregone, or that an insight apparently counter to that of the body of the Meeting will be divisive.

Friends who feel they cannot agree with what they perceive to be the weight of the Meeting must not yield to the temptation to absent themselves from the meeting for business in order to spare both themselves and the Meeting. Such an absence implies a lack of faith in the Meeting's access to divine guidance and its ability to find unity.

Both speaking and listening should be marked by respect for others,

with speakers saying only what they know to be worth others' hearing, and with listeners seeking the Light as it is revealed through others. An openness of spirit is crucial, especially when differing views are being expressed.

Friends have learned the value of contributions from serious and consistent attenders who are not members. Many Meetings welcome all who care to attend at decision-making sessions. Non-members should show sensitive restraint when addressing Meeting affairs. Each Meeting is at liberty to limit the participation of attenders; such limits should be clearly defined and communicated in advance to avoid embarrassment and hurt feelings. Prior definition is particularly important with respect to any sessions which involve confidential information or evaluations of individuals.

No one should take action on the Meeting's behalf in anticipation of a minute's approval, but should wait for actual approval.

The Role of the Clerk

Ideally, the clerk is both servant and leader who thoughtfully prepares for the meeting; maintains a worshipful spirit in the meeting; sets a helpful pace; discerns the sense of the meeting when it is present; and expresses it clearly or identifies those who can do so. Such a clerk sensitively searches for the right course of action and helps maintain the meeting's spiritual unity. All these tasks are accomplished in an active, informed, helping spirit, facilitating but never dominating, carefully free from partisanship.

When nominated and appointed by members of the Meeting, the clerk accepts the obligation to focus time, energies, and gifts in the fulfillment of that trust.

The clerk helps the Meeting move through the agenda with efficient but unhurried dispatch, keeping the members' attention on the matters to be considered. The clerk listens, learns, and sifts, searching for the sense of the meeting, possibly suggesting tentative minutes or periods of silent worship to help clarify or focus Friends' leadings. The clerk encourages those who are reluctant to speak, and in like manner restrains those who tend to speak at undue length or to speak too often.

When the sense of the meeting seems to be clear, the clerk lays it before the Meeting. If there are objections or reservations, the clerk opens the way for further seeking and refinement. When there are no further objections or refinements, the clerk directs that the sense of the meeting be so recorded.

It is especially important that the clerk make clear what previous decisions or customs have been established on a given issue since lack of unity on a proposed change normally means that the status quo will be preserved.

When the sense of the meeting seems elusive, the clerk should be sensitive to the potential benefit of deferring the matter to a later time, to a different body, or to a different forum.

The clerk should be careful to refrain from opinionated participation in the discussion. Further, the clerk should be alert to those occasions when his or her ability to read the sense of the meeting may be blurred by deep personal convictions. In that event, the clerk stands aside and asks the Meeting to recognize someone else as clerk for the moment.

After the meeting is concluded it is the clerk's duty to ensure that those charged by the Meeting with new tasks or specific actions are informed of their responsibilities. The clerk also takes care that matters held over appear in later agenda. Finally, letters or documents whose drafting has been entrusted to the clerk are promptly dispatched.

The Role of the Recording Clerk

The proceedings of a meeting should be carefully and appropriately minuted by someone designated to serve as recording clerk.

Since meetings are held for different purposes, the recording clerk's minutes reflect the essential purpose of each meeting, be it for decision, for discussion, or for inspiration. The recording clerk should state precisely the nature, extent, and timing of actions directed to be taken and the persons responsible. Ambiguity and inaccuracy must be avoided.

Minutes should be written in the knowledge that at a later date the Meeting may well need a full and circumstantial account of its decision and how it was reached.

In the writing of minutes, the recording clerk is more effective when there has been detailed prior consultation with the presiding clerk so that names, dates, and proposals are already familiar. It is then also possible for the recording clerk to prepare tentative introductory sentences for each item of business, especially those that are routine.

A recording clerk does not hesitate to ask for help in formulating minutes. Where the action to be taken is clear but the wording of the proposed minute is not, it is sometimes useful to ask a few Friends to withdraw to prepare a final draft for the Meeting's later consideration. In some cases, the presiding clerk rather than the recording clerk will be in a better position to write the minute.

The recording clerk may at times be asked to prepare a minute on a matter of substance while the Meeting waits. All others present should settle into silent and supportive prayer until this task is complete.

In some instances a meeting may approve a minute in principle, being satisfied that its later refinement need not come before the Meeting again.

Once adopted, minutes retain their authority until amended by a subsequent minute.

To prevent confusion and misunderstanding, some Meetings find it useful for the recording clerk to read the minutes and have them approved from time to time during the course of the meeting or at the end; others read only those minutes referring to weighty and difficult matters and approve the complete minutes at the following session. Meetings follow a variety of practices in this regard, each of which has merit. If minutes are considered at a later session, those not present when business was discussed and actions taken should refrain from sharing in the approval of the minutes.

Recording clerks and clerks are granted the freedom to make only editorial changes or correct inaccuracies in the minutes, taking care that their meaning is in no way changed thereby. If other correction is needed, it should be brought before the Meeting at a later session.

All minutes are preserved in ways that will ensure their availability and permanence.

The Good Order Used Among Us

Thoughtful preparation frees the Meeting to follow the leadings of the Spirit, preventing frustration arising from poor arrangements, incomplete information, or unclear procedure.

The clerks or other designated persons prepare the agenda and, if appropriate, distribute the agenda and other essential information in advance. They may need to remind persons who are to bring matters before the meeting to come prepared. They must be careful to call members' attention to issues of special moment.

Arrangements are made for the time and place of gathering, child care, meals, hospitality, and other organizational matters as needed, to permit as many as possible to attend and to provide ample opportunity for the unhurried disposition of business.

Members who are prompt in arrival and disciplined in settling into worship contribute much to the depth and power of the meeting. It is also important that this time of settling and focusing not become a brief formality.

Where a presiding or recording clerk has not already been appointed or is unable to serve, the Meeting may ask any member to serve until a regular appointment is made.

Decision-making by sense of the meeting applies to easy issues as well as to difficult ones. Matters felt to be routine but necessary are dealt with quickly in a spirit of trust. The Meeting may accept without extended discussion a suggestion volunteered by the clerk or other member, or may empower an individual or a committee to act on the matter.

Matters of importance are best presented by someone who is familiar with the issues. However, the Meeting must also be open to hear the concerns of others who may not be as widely experienced or well informed, but who nevertheless feel strongly led.

The promptings of the Inward Teacher may come with power to any present, without respect to age or experience. Friends know that sensitive and powerful insights come to newer and younger members. They also know the importance of those whose experience and advice in similar matters have been helpful in the past.

THE MEETING IN CONFLICT

Friends often find themselves most challenged when matters before them call forth strongly held but incompatible responses. A Meeting which goes forward for whatever reason without real unity in the Spirit does so at its peril. When any member present feels so strongly led as to wish to prevent the Meeting from acting, it is important that the Meeting take the time to test this leading in a loving spirit, and examine responsibly the consequences if the action is not taken.

The search for the course of action that will keep the meeting in unity—or the resolution of the problems caused by disunity itself—rests as much with the individual or group in opposition as it does with the other members.

Questions for a Meeting in Conflict

When disagreement on an issue threatens to divide a Meeting, it may be helpful for the Meeting and each Friend to consider the following questions:

- Have all Friends taken care to fully examine, in a loving and prayerful spirit, the perspective of those with whom they disagree?
- Have all Friends truly tried to leave behind their personal desires, the better to be led by the Spirit?

- Do all Friends seek to discern God's will in all viewpoints?
- Have Friends considered whether God's will for them as individuals may differ from God's will for the Meeting?
- Do those in conflict regularly reaffirm, in voice and attitude, the love they feel for one another?

Moving Forward in Unity

In situations of conflicting insights, Friends have found helpful several ways of moving forward in unity:

- The Meeting may move to a deeper spiritual searching and sharing, often entering periods of silent worship. Every conviction is examined in the Light as Friends wait together to discern whether their convictions stem from a genuine motion of the Spirit. Friends may thus be empowered to lay aside those convictions which are not so based. While seeking new light, Friends should also remain faithful to the leadings they sense as authentic, even when these seem contrary to the weight of the Meeting.
- The Meeting may wait or proceed with other business while a small representative ad hoc committee withdraws, in the hope that they can bring forward a minute or course of action that will lead to unity.
- The Meeting may reschedule the matter for another time, encouraging members in the interim to continue their search for the right action, whether in solitary prayer and meditation, or in small informal groups.
- After patient searching over a considerable period, the Meeting may conclude that the sense of the meeting is clear and unity in the Spirit can be maintained if that sense is translated into action, but acknowledge that a few Friends continue to have reservations about the substance of the proposed action. In that event, those Friends may feel led to withdraw their objections, being unwilling to stand in the way of the Meeting. Or those Friends may say that they feel released from the burden of their concern, having laid it on the conscience of the Meeting. Or they may stand aside while maintaining their objections, asking that their names and the grounds of their objections be minuted.

Friends who stand aside are affirming their continuing spiritual unity with the Meeting. That unity will require of those Friends acceptance with good grace of the decision's consequences for the Meeting and for themselves. It will require the rest of the Meeting to keep the objections firmly in mind as they proceed.

Each of these avenues expresses trust in divine guidance and a commitment to remaining in unity in the Spirit.

Committees for Clearness

Friends may be most familiar with clearness as the process a Meeting uses to decide whether to take a marriage under its care, or to accept someone into membership. More and more, however, Friends are rediscovering the power of committees for clearness to guide and support members facing a crisis in their lives, sensing a leading towards a personal witness or considering a change in life's direction.

Those who wish the help of a clearness committee may ask the clerk of the Meeting that such a committee be formed. Meetings are encouraged to establish a procedure for the forming of clearness committees so that the Meeting may be prepared and supportive when a Friend so requests.

Members of a clearness committee are chosen based on their willingness to devote prayerful time and energy, their knowledge and experience, and their ability to ask searching questions and provide support and guidance in a spirit of loving worship. Those seeking clearness may suggest Friends who would bring significant gifts to the committee.

When Friends gather in a committee for clearness, we find ourselves under the same loving discipline as when we gather for meetings for worship and business: an openness to the Holy Spirit and a commitment to one another and to discerning God's will. We listen deeply to those who have asked for guidance. We do not come intent on giving advice or taking a position. The gathering includes an explanation of the issue or problem for which clearness has been sought, periods of worship, time for questions, and an opportunity for the sharing of insight and inspiration. The clerk of the committee guides this process, mindful of the needs of the Friend seeking clearness and of the promptings of the Spirit.

Whether or not clearness is reached, it is helpful to report to the monthly meeting, being careful to respect confidentiality. This enables the Meeting to continue to respond to the Friend who requested clearness, and to support any changes or witness this Friend undertakes.

Committees for clearness can help Friends be obedient to the Spirit and enable Meetings to better support and nurture their members, build trust, and deepen spiritual community.

Friends and the Bible

Friends' appreciation of the Bible and other scriptures springs from our faith that there is in everyone the capacity to be open and responsive to the experience of the Divine. The possibility of that experience has been present in every place and time, even before the Bible was written, whenever and wherever people have earnestly sought communion with God and an understanding of God's will.

The influence of the Bible upon the Society of Friends has been both unique and profound. George Fox knew the Bible intimately prior to his great "openings"—openings that dealt radically with both religious and social issues and that continue to influence our Society. He insisted that his openings came first by God's "immediate spirit and power" but were later found to be "agreeable to Holy Scriptures." Like Fox, Friends since have found the Bible to be the record of direct experiences of the Holy Spirit, serving as an important touchstone against which to test our leadings.

Friends at all times have brought to their reading of these scriptures light from other sources. Through historical, literary, and cultural studies as well as sifted experience we have enriched the insights provided by our reading of the Bible. As a Society we have been generally freed from the so-called conflict between science and faith, finding instead therein a mutual illumination.

Friends know from experience that knowledge of the Bible widely shared in a Meeting deepens the spiritual power of both spoken ministry and inward listening. The Bible, moreover, even in those parts that seem alien and uncongenial, challenges us to examine more closely our current assumptions and leadings. Maturing insight and experience often discover that passages once apparently irrelevant and lifeless speak truth with power.

Given the Bible's importance in shaping the ways Friends have expressed their experience of the presence and leading of God and its power to illumine our worship and our vocal ministry, we are encouraged to know it well.

We do not, however, consider scriptures, whether Hebrew or Christian or those of other religious faiths, to be the final revelation of God's nature and will. Rather, we believe in continuing revelation. This term emphasizes our ongoing communion with the Living God, our expanding sensitivity in our relationships with one another, and our growing knowledge of the universe.

Since it also has great nurturing power for individuals, knowledge of the Bible opens our spirits to the religious power of art, music, and literature. The Bible warns us as well of the violence that can spring from our individual self-righteousness and of the hard-heartedness rooted in our alienation from God. It offers the words to express the guidance that can flow from our responsiveness to the Light Within, as in Amos' call that we "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24); as in Jesus' citing the two great commandments (Matt. 22: 37-39); and as in Paul's injunction that we speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Yet most importantly, the Bible offers us hope, as in Jesus' assurance: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7).

Prayer

The continuing experience of Friends has been that opening ourselves in prayer to the Divine is essential for deepening worship and rightly ordered lives. Since Friends have no prescribed form of prayer, we are free to choose those practices and those words to designate the Divine that meet our individual needs.

There are many ways to pray. Prayer can be sung, thought, spoken, or expressed through the work of our hands or the movements of our bodies. We may use formal prayers, such as the one that Jesus taught us, or pour forth our own heartfelt words. Prayer can be as simple as delighted gratitude for the day. It can be the quiet outpouring of the desire of the heart or even wordless, simply being in the Presence. It can be as complex as digging into ourselves in order to remove blocks to openness to the Spirit's action in our lives.

For many, prayer also grows out of a desire for a closer relationship with God as we discover that God reaches for us even as we reach for God. God loves us first. To center and be close to God can be a difficult exercise; yet, sometimes, with no apparent effort, one feels prayed through as an instrument of the Holy Spirit. Our prayers and lives of service are a response to this Infinite Love as we experience who we are and from whom we come.

Prayer with others or in solitude or in the attentive listening in the quiet of the meeting for worship often becomes the seedbed for leadings to service. When action proceeds out of lives of prayer, it serves neither the

ego nor the need to succeed but instead fulfills our desire to be faithful to the leadings of the Light.

For many, asking God for healing for ourselves and for others is an integral part of prayer. It is their experience that mind and spirit, though wounded even at the deepest levels, can be healed through prayer and so become whole. Listening to our inmost being where the Inward Christ dwells enables us to go out and touch others in love and acceptance. Through prayer, Friends can enter with those of other faiths into a unity deeper than words or forms.

Many Friends have found that regular times for prayer are an important discipline, for it is through regular practice that prayer becomes central to our lives. Indeed, through the regular practice of prayer, our spirits grow and flourish in unanticipated ways. In the assurance that our Creator hears and cares, prayer can be a time of humble confession and yearning for forgiveness, a time when we do not ask for answers but seek to return to the order of God's world. In prayer we can pour forth our sorrow, our anger, our love, our joy, our thanksgiving for inward peace.

While prayer is most often intensely private, vocal prayer can be a helpful ministry in meetings for worship and for business. It may also spring up or be requested in the company of another or in small groups. Whether as individuals or families or Meetings, in spoken or silent grace before meals, we gratefully acknowledge our dependence upon God.

In prayer we may open ourselves to God's loving, teaching, healing, and recreating us so that we become people who worship in spirit and in truth and do God's work with joy on earth.

Friends and the Sacraments

The absence from Friends' worship of the outward observance of the Lord's Supper, water baptism, and other sacraments emphasizes the reality of inward experience. Friends are aware of the power of a true, inward baptism of the Holy Spirit; in meeting for worship at its best they know direct communion with God and fellowship with one another. These experiences make the outward rites seem unnecessary and, to some Friends, a hindrance to full attainment of the spiritual experiences which are symbolized.

While fully appreciative of the help that has come through the outward forms to many generations of Christians, Friends symbolize by their

very lack of symbols the essentially inward nature of the sacraments. However, just as rituals and forms may become ends in themselves and thus diminished in spiritual power, so doctrinaire repudiation of form and ritual may become an end in itself, devoid of life.

Friends affirm the sacramental nature of the whole of life when it is under the leading of the Spirit. Any moment, any relationship, any object when so touched can serve as a sacrament. Insofar as we are faithful in our testimonies, our very lives may thus serve for others as the outward and visible evidence of inward and invisible communion.