

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting - Faith & Practice Revision Group
Proposed Section: “II. Experience and Faith”

1 **Philadelphia Yearly Meeting**

2 **Faith and Practice**

3

4 **II. Experience and Faith**

5

6 *Friends are advised to place God, not ourselves, in the center of the universe and, in all aspects*
7 *of inward life and outward activity, to keep themselves open to the healing power of the Spirit*
8 *of Christ.*

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Advices, I

10

11 **The Light Within**

12

13 The central experience of Friends is the reality of a direct unmediated relationship with the
14 Divine. Through this spiritual relationship, each person encounters within themselves a Spirit
15 that is active in the world and that provides guidance for everyday living. The reality of this
16 spiritual relationship within each worshipper brings us together as a community of faith.

17 Friends have used many terms or phrases to designate this source and inner certainty of our
18 faith in addition to the Light Within, the Divine, and Spirit. The Divine Presence, the Spirit of
19 Truth, that of God in every person, the Christ Within, the Inward Teacher, the Seed, and the
20 Inner Light are examples. George Fox refers in his *Journal* to “that Inward Light, Spirit, and
21 Grace by which all might know their salvation” and to “that Divine Spirit which would lead them
22 into all truth.”

23 Friends understand that this faithfulness to Spirit brings power: namely, the power that arises
24 from life in community, from supporting each other within that community, and most of all
25 from living in harmony with the Divine. George Fox often refers to this experience of power and
26 its relationship to the Light Within. For instance, he declares that “the power of God sprang
27 through me” and admonishes us to “hearken to the Light, that ye may feel the power of God in
28 every one of you.”

29 Continuing faithfulness to the Light Within increases our gratitude for divine gifts, including an
30 awareness of enduring values, the joys of life, comfort and solace, and the ability to resolve
31 problems in accord with divine leading. Under the guidance of Spirit in corporate worship,
32 individuals grow in their capacity for discernment and sensitivity to their own true needs and to
33 the needs of the meeting. This helps the meeting make decisions and face undertakings in a
34 process as detached from prejudice and self-interest as possible. Basic Quaker testimonies such

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35 as equality, simplicity, nonviolence, integrity, and community arise from a deep sense of
36 individual and corporate responsibility guided by the Inward Teacher.

37 For Friends, the Light Within is not the same as the conscience or moral faculty. The conscience
38 is a human element that is unavoidably conditioned by education, personal experience, and the
39 cultural and social environment; it is not, therefore, a dependable guide to a Spirit-led life.
40 Friends are encouraged to test their leadings by seeking clearness through direct communion
41 with the Divine in prayer and in the meeting for worship, through personal discernment
42 including the reading of scriptures and other sources of wisdom, and through a more structured
43 clearness process. (cf. p.) Such testing enables one to become more truly aware of and
44 obedient to the Light Within.

45 Recognition that God’s Light is in every person helps us to overcome our apparent separation
46 and our differences from others and leads to a sympathetic awareness of their needs and a
47 sense of responsibility towards them. Friends believe that the more widely and clearly the Light
48 is recognized and followed, the more the human family will come into harmony and peace.
49 “Therefore,” writes George Fox, “in the Light wait, where unity is.”

50 **The Meeting for Worship**

51

52 The meeting for worship is the fundamental experience of the Religious Society of Friends.
53 Meeting for worship draws us together in the enlightening and empowering presence of God,
54 and sends us forth with renewed vision and commitment.

55 Early Friends took literally the recorded words of Jesus: “For where two or three are gathered
56 in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20). Early Friends also understood
57 that this ‘presence in the midst’ could be apprehended by all who seek it, unmediated by
58 minister, priest, or other clergy. Friends also understood that the experience of God continues
59 to unfold and that the record of God’s presence in human lives continues to be written. These
60 understandings, coupled with the foundational belief in the Light Within, create the robust
61 theological assumptions that undergird Friends’ experience of worship.

62 Today, Friends gather to experience the power of God, the giver and sustainer of all life, in our
63 meetings for worship. Friends’ worship manifests our deep desire for communion with God
64 and the offering of all of ourselves – body and soul – in service. During meeting for worship, we
65 experience awe in the gathered silence and grateful awareness of our profound connectedness
66 to one another and to the natural world and its power. In worship we know repentance and

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67 forgiveness in the acknowledgement of God as the ultimate source of our being, and the
68 serenity that comes from receiving and accepting Divine love and guidance.

69
70 In worship we discover direction for our lives and for the use of our resources. Leadings of the
71 Spirit are often made clearer by reference to the life and teachings of Jesus and other spiritual
72 leaders and by the transforming power of the Inner Light. From worship come fresh
73 understandings of the two great commandments: to ‘love God with all your heart, and with all
74 your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’
75 (Luke 10:27).

76
77 Careful listening to the Inward Teacher can lead to fresh openings: an inpouring of love, insight,
78 and interdependence. True listening can bring the worshipper to new awareness, at times
79 troubling or disrupting to one’s ordered life. At other times, the worshipper is attuned to the
80 wholeness of heart infused by God’s love.

81
82 Friends understand that worship is continuous and each person who enters the meeting room
83 joins in quietly and settles into the deepening silence. Worship grows from expectant patient
84 waiting in the Spirit. The meeting for worship clears space for God’s presence to be felt and
85 God’s voice to be heard. Vital worship depends on a deeply felt longing for God.

86
87 The worship experience is enriched when individuals come to meeting with hearts and minds
88 prepared for worship through thoughtful reflection and listening to the Inward Teacher in the
89 course of daily life and service. Friends also develop a variety of personal spiritual practices in
90 support of their meeting for worship experience, such as daily prayer, meditation, Bible study,
91 journaling, inspirational literature, poetry, song, and familiarity with the spiritual journeys of
92 others. These preparatory experiences, beneficial in their own right, often lead to a deeper
93 experience during meeting for worship itself.

94
95 *The divine strength that is communicated by meeting together... and by waiting in*
96 *silence upon God is very evident. Sometimes a person will come in who has not been*
97 *vigilant and whose mind is restless, or who comes in suddenly from the rush of worldly*
98 *business and therefore is not gathered with the rest. As soon as he retires inwardly, the*
99 *power which has already been raised in good measure by the whole meeting will*
100 *suddenly lay hold upon his spirit. In a wonderful way it will help to raise up the good in*
101 *him and will give birth to a sense of the same power. It will melt and warm his heart in*
102 *the same way that a man who is cold feels warmth when he approaches a stove, or a*
103 *flame takes hold in some small combustible material that is nearby. Robert Barclay*

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104 *(Barclay’s Apology in Modern English. Dean Freiday (ed.) (Elberton, NJ, Dean Freiday,*
105 *1962), pp. 252-253.)*

106 Each experience of worship is unique and each worshipper approaches meeting for worship in a
107 personal way. Together with other Friends present, individuals seek to center themselves in
108 relaxed focused attention and open themselves to the movement of the Spirit. Even in times
109 of spiritual emptiness, Friends find it useful to be present in worship.

110 Worshipping together strengthens the members of the worshipping community and deepens
111 the act of worship itself. Communal worship is akin to the luminous unity and fulfillment – the
112 mystical Oneness – that arises when musicians, responding to the music before them, offer up
113 their separate gifts in concert.

114
115 Friends know from experience the transforming presence of God that comes to the
116 worshipping community through silent prayer and vocal ministry. Spirits are renewed when we
117 turn away from distractions and toward an inward serenity. When we experience such a
118 profound and evident Oneness with God and with one another, we speak of a *gathered*
119 meeting for worship.

120 **Vocal Ministry**

121
122 Direct communion with God constitutes the essential experience of the meeting for worship.
123 Fresh insights may come to any worshipper out of the living stillness. Some are purely
124 personal, providing guidance and inspiration to that individual. Others seem meant for the
125 meeting as a whole. In this case, the worshipper feels a compelling inward call to vocal
126 ministry. Friends may experience physical manifestations as diverse as a quickening within or a
127 profound stillness that impel them to rise and share the message received from Spirit. (See pp.
128 in Tools for Discernment for guidance in testing a leading to speak in meeting for worship.)
129

130 Vocal ministry may take many forms such as prayer, song, story, or testimonial. Non-verbal
131 ministry such as dance may also be an offering in response to the movement of the Spirit. The
132 content of the message itself might be a life lesson, praise of God, gratitude, supplication,
133 warning, or invocation. Individual messages may converge toward a single, vital theme during
134 the meeting; often, apparently unrelated messages are later discovered to have an underlying
135 unity. Such ministry and prayer may answer the unrecognized or unvoiced needs of other
136 seekers and may carry over into subsequent meetings for worship.

137

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138 When someone accepts the call of the Spirit to share a message aloud in meeting, fellow
139 worshippers are called to receive the message with open minds and hearts. Friends recognize
140 that not all messages immediately speak to every worshipper; a message that seems discordant
141 to one may be deeply moving to another. Diffident and hesitant Friends should feel the
142 Meeting community's loving encouragement to give voice, even if haltingly, to the message
143 that arises within them. Friends who are frequent speakers in meeting for worship serve the
144 meeting best when they, like all others, wait patiently for the prompting of the Inward Teacher.
145 Friends need time to absorb each message so it is helpful to allow space between messages.

146

147 Friends are encouraged to be open to the movement of the Spirit in ministry. Deciding in
148 advance to speak or *not* to speak; feeling a duty to provide some balance between silence and
149 the spoken word; or crafting a message to appeal to guests, children, or some other audience
150 are examples of unhelpful obstructions to the movement of the Spirit. We are reminded to
151 trust the Spirit: even if not a single word is spoken, meetings for worship can be profoundly
152 moving experiences for all present.

153

154 There are many other obstructions to the movement of the Spirit during meeting for worship.
155 Periodically, each monthly meeting examines its own condition through use of queries (see p.
156 xx) to illuminate the obstructions to which the meeting is prone. Some common obstructions
157 include individuals unprepared to enter worship, vocal ministry carried on in a debate or lecture
158 style, promotion of a strongly held view or cause, voicing an announcement best shared before
159 or after meeting for worship, or individuals habitually reading or otherwise distracted. While
160 one meeting may tolerate behavior that seems odd to another, the healthy meeting ensures
161 that the Spirit is able to move freely among the gathered community through the sensitive
162 intervention and counsel of the worship and ministry committee or others appointed for this
163 service.

164

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

171

172 **Prayer**

173

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174 The continuing experience of Friends is that prayer is essential both for deepening worship and
175 for rightly ordered lives. Since Friends have no prescribed form of prayer, we are free to choose
176 those practices and words that meet our individual and communal needs.

177

178 There are many ways to pray. Prayer can be sung, thought, spoken, or expressed through the
179 work of our hands or the movements of our bodies. We may use formal prayers, such as the
180 one that Jesus taught us, or our own heartfelt words. Prayer can be as simple as gratitude for
181 each new day. It can be the outpouring of the desire of the heart, or being in the Presence
182 where words are unnecessary. Prayer also can be full of struggle as we as we search ourselves
183 to remove blocks to Spirit’s action in our lives.

184

185 Prayer can grow out of a desire for a closer relationship with God; we discover that God reaches
186 for us even as we reach for God. To center and be close to God can be a difficult exercise; there
187 may be times when we feel far removed from God and from all that is good. At such times
188 prayer can help us wait for the guidance of the Inward Teacher; and there may be times, with
189 no apparent effort on our part, that one feels ‘prayed through’ as an instrument of the Holy
190 Spirit. Our prayers and lives of service are a response to Infinite Love as we experience whose
191 we are and from whom we come.

192

193 Prayer in solitude or in the attentive listening in meeting for worship often becomes the
194 seedbed for leadings to service. When action proceeds out of a life of prayer, it may fulfill our
195 desire to be faithful to the leadings of the Light.

196

197 For many, asking God for healing for ourselves and for others is an integral part of prayer. It is
198 the experience of Friends that, even though wounded at the deepest levels, mind and spirit can
199 be healed through prayer and thus become whole. Listening to the Inward Christ enables us to
200 meet others with love and acceptance. Through prayer Friends can enter into a deeper unity
201 with those of other faiths rather than be stymied by word or form.

202

203 Friends experience that through regular practice, prayer becomes central to our lives. Indeed,
204 through such practice our spirits grow and flourish in unanticipated ways. In the assurance that
205 our Creator hears and cares, prayer can be a time of humble confession and yearning for
206 forgiveness, a time when we seek to return to the order of God’s world. In prayer we can pour
207 forth our sorrow, our anger, our love, our joy, our thanksgiving.

208

209 While prayer is often intensely private, it can be a powerful ministry in meetings for worship
210 and for business. In prayer we open ourselves to God’s loving, teaching, and healing; through

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211 prayer we are transformed so that we worship in Spirit and in Truth and do God’s work with
212 joy.

213

214 **Friends and Scripture**

215

216 Friends’ appreciation of the Bible and other scriptures springs from our faith that everyone can
217 respond to the experience of the Divine. The possibility of that experience has been present
218 whenever and wherever people have earnestly sought communion with God and an
219 understanding of God’s blessed community.

220

221 Friends bring to their reading of these scriptures insight from other sources. Through historical,
222 literary, and cultural studies as well as lived experience we have enriched the understandings
223 provided by our reading of scriptures. As a Society we have been generally freed from the
224 conflict between science and faith, finding instead a mutual illumination through both.

225

226 Friends know from experience that knowledge of the Bible widely shared in a Meeting deepens
227 both spoken ministry and inward listening. The Bible, including those parts that seem alien,
228 challenges us to examine more closely our current assumptions and understandings. Maturing
229 insight and experience often lead us to discover that passages once thought irrelevant and
230 lifeless have power and meaning. Given its importance in shaping the ways Friends have
231 expressed their experience of the Presence and leading of God and its power to illumine our
232 worship and our vocal ministry, Friends are encouraged to study and know the Bible well.

233

234 Since it has great nurturing power for individuals, knowledge of the Bible opens our spirits to
235 the religious power of art, music and literature. The Bible also cautions us on the violence that
236 can spring from our individual self-righteousness, and of hard-heartedness rooted in our
237 alienation from God. It offers the words to guide our response to the Light Within, as in Amos’
238 call that we “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream”
239 (Amos 5:24); in Jesus citing the two great commandments (Matt. 22:37-39); and in Paul’s
240 injunction that we speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Yet most importantly, the Bible offers us
241 hope, as in Jesus’ assurance: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and
242 it shall be opened to you” (Matt. 7:7).

243

244 The influence of the Bible upon the Religious Society of Friends has been both unique and
245 profound. George Fox knew the Bible intimately prior to his great ‘openings’ that dealt radically
246 with both religious and social issues. He insisted that his openings came first by God’s
247 “immediate spirit and power” but were later found to be “agreeable to Holy Scriptures.” Like

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248 Fox, Friends have often found the Bible to be the record of direct experiences of the Holy Spirit,
249 serving as an important touchstone against which to test our leadings.

250

251 Friends do not consider any scriptures, including the Bible, to be the final Word of God. Rather,
252 Friends believe in *continuing revelation* in recognition of our ongoing communion with the
253 Living God, our expanding sensitivity in our relationships with one another, and our growing
254 knowledge of the universe.

255

256 **Friends and the Sacraments**

257

258 Friends seek to experience the power of a true, inward baptism of the Holy Spirit. The absence
259 from Friends’ practice of the outward observance of water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and
260 other sacraments emphasizes the reality of this inward experience. In meeting for worship at its
261 best, we experience direct communion with God and spiritual fellowship with one another. This
262 makes outward rites seem unnecessary and, to some Friends, a hindrance to full attainment of
263 the spiritual experiences which these rites symbolize. However, just as rituals and forms may
264 become ends in themselves and thus diminished in spiritual power, so may doctrinaire
265 repudiation of rituals and forms become an end in itself, devoid of life.

266

267 Friends affirm the sacramental nature of the whole of life when it is under the leading of the
268 Spirit. Any moment, any relationship, any object when so infused can be sacramental. When we
269 are faithful to our principles, our very lives serve as outward and visible evidence of inward and
270 invisible communion with the Divine.

271