

there to care for the safe delivery of the ministry while being aware of the care of the minister. Being in the role of elder, like the role of midwife, is both joyful and demanding work. The work for both is not always pretty, painless, clean, or appreciated in the moment.

My own understanding of the role of elder is that at its best it is a function, not a position. Anyone may perform an eldering function without being appointed to a particular office in the meeting. For example, our nominating committees perform an eldering function in trying to discover and call out gifts of our members for certain committee assignments or meeting offices. Oversight committees appointed in many meetings for Friends who are traveling under concern, provide the eldering function of helping the traveling Friend stay true to her/his leading.

The elder is responsible for clearing a space in which the ministry may come forward. This function

of "clearing a space" or "creating an opening" can be applied to our pastoral care function as well. At our best we clear a space so that clarity may come forward in those who are applicants for membership or marriage. When we work with Friends who are in conflict with one another, we seek to create an opening to that deep place where unity can be found between them.

The role of elder is one of love, care, and toughness. Considering some of the disciplines of the elder may help us to carry out our pastoral care role with that same love, care, and toughness.

Disciplines of the Elder Applied to Pastoral Care

Discipline 1: An Intentional Relationship

As I have experimented with the roles of minister and elder, I am aware that each requires certain disciplines. The core of the relationship of the minister and elder is a mutual intention to listen

One Meeting's Experience: Seeking the Support of an Elder

Sharon's story: Our family was in the middle of a crisis. My teenage son had been accused of a major infraction at school. He maintained, in the face of all evidence, that he had not done it. In the hearing, held at the school at the discretion of the principal, we supported him in his moral stand, but because of the nature of the evidence, it was difficult to know what had actually happened. Our son made a moral stand, denied his guilt and took the consequences.

In the days following the event, it was clear that he was furious at us. He couldn't understand how we would not believe him. We were deeply upset with him. Everything I did seemed to make things worse. I became afraid that there would be a permanent rift. Then suddenly Elaine popped into my head, and I saw us meeting with her. Elaine is a friend, a woman in our meeting with great spiritual and healing gifts. Even though my husband does not attend meeting, he knows and respects Elaine, as does our son.

Elaine: Sharon and I joined the meeting at about the same time and have gotten to know one another well over the years. I have known her son since he was a young child. This is a good, solid family, and I had confidence that they could sort themselves out and come out of this situation intact. I knew that what I needed to do was to provide a space for the Spirit

to move. It is my custom to hold people in the light before I meet with them. Usually what comes to me in prayer is where I start and what I got was for the four of us to start with silence and prayer.

Sharon: When we arrived at Elaine's I immediately recognized it as a worshipful space. There was a calm about the room like a meetinghouse. Elaine herself seemed relaxed and centered. She invited us to begin by settling into silence. We had agreed in advance that we were not there to talk about the details of the situation at the school but to heal the damage to our family. After the silence, she asked each of us to speak of our perception of why we were there. She functioned as a gentle, centered clerk guiding our family to talk with one another, witnessing. She reassured us by observing along the way, "I see people who are listening to each other." Her presence was calming. Through her confidence that we were going to survive this experience, we began to see our situation as an immediate crisis, not a long term problem.

Elaine: It is hard to talk about the role I played as their family sought their way. I tried to listen behind and beyond their words. I was listening to their fears, to their love, to his yearning for his parents to support

together to the movement of the Spirit. The minister is tuned-in to this source so that he can carry out his ministry. The elder pays deep attention to that same source. Similarly, pastoral care is richest when both parties enter the relationship with the intention to listen to the movement of the Spirit.

When I am in the minister role in an intentional relationship with an elder, I give a weight to the elder's words that I might not outside this relationship. I listen with the expectation that the Spirit is speaking through him to me.

When I am in the intentional relationship as an elder, my focus on the minister excludes my personal needs at that time. Much as a clerk needs to suppress her opinions in the context of the meeting for business so as to be a clear vessel, so an elder suppresses his needs during the interactions of care for the minister.

him, to their absolute pride in him for not being willing to compromise his principles tempered with their awareness of what a hard life that leads to. I tried to put myself in the place of meeting for worship and wait for the words to come – it is not a process of figuring it out what to say. It did feel like a meeting for worship as the family yielded to the Spirit and spoke from a deep place where they could be unguarded.

Sharon: I knew that I needed healing and that going into a prayerful space is a preparation for healing, but I couldn't do it for myself or for my family. That's the definition of being in crisis – you can't help yourself. That's when you need pastoral care. We needed someone who was going to hold us in the Light and be solid in that prayerful state. We needed Elaine to allow the three of us to enter that healing space together. It was very moving. We got to say the things we needed to say. My son and I cried. In the end my husband and I were released to simply love and support him, and he understood that we did. As we were leaving Elaine said to me, "You know, it's OK to think the best of your children." It's something I wrote down and put up on my wall.

*As told by Sharon Doyle and Elaine Emily
Orange Grove Meeting, Pasadena, CA*

Discipline II: Deep Listening for Discernment

Deep listening is essential in the role of the elder – to listen with your heart, not just your ears or mind. The discernment of an elder is similar to what one uses in discerning a message to speak in worship. It is from that place of Spirit within that one listens while serving as an elder, seeking to be guided by the Inner Teacher. I find it helpful to focus beneath what is actually being spoken in words, to listen to the place from which the words are coming, to sense the movement of the Spirit.

Deep listening can also be a beneficial skill to nurture in pastoral care. In offering pastoral care to a member in need, in drawing that person out, I listen to the Spirit within him and also to the movement of Spirit within myself. In order to be clear enough to discern, I need to clear myself of assumptions – what I think the outcomes should be, what I would do if I were in her shoes, the tasks that I left behind and would really rather be tending – all the chatty little voices that I hear that distract me from deep listening. When I am successful in quieting those voices of my own stuff, when I empty myself out, I often find that the other person is able listen with less defensiveness. Together we are more able to enter into faithfully seeking a creative, mutually satisfying outcome.

Difficulties in Applying the Disciplines of the Elder to Pastoral Care

There can be challenges in applying these disciplines to the pastoral care duties in our meetings. First, there may be resistance by those Friends offering the care. Many who are drawn to service on our committees of pastoral care are motivated by a healthy no-nonsense pragmatism. Such Friends may see these disciplines awkward or irrelevant to the process of responding to the practical needs of our members. Yet, it is my experience that deep listening can enrich even the most routine service. By deep listening we may allow the couple seeking marriage to come to a richer understanding of that commitment. We may draw out the shut-in to discover the need for prayer and presence that is as important as the need for casseroles.

Secondly, there may be resistance from the person receiving pastoral care. The disciplines of the elder assume a mutual intentional relationship to listen for the movement of the Spirit. Even if you as pastoral care-giver desire that shared intention, there

Readings on Elders in the Society of Friends

"Bringing Our Messages & Witness to Birth: Mothers, Midwives, and the Minister/Elder Relationship." Notes from Conference at Quaker Center, Ben Lomond, California, led by Jan Hoffman, Bob Schmitt, and Kenneth Sutton, fall 1999.*

CFM Ministry and Counsel Eldership Resources
Cambridge Friends Meeting Feb. 2000. *

Clearness Committees and their Use in Personal Discernment by Jan Hoffman. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1996.#

A Description of the Qualifications Necessary to a Gospel Minister, by Samuel Bownas, with an Introduction by William Taber. Philadelphia: Pendle Hill Publications and Tract Association of Friends, 1989 (from the 1767 edition).#

Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order by Lloyd Lee Wilson. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1993. #

"Experiences of the Relationships of Minister & Elders" presentation by Jan Hoffman at New York Yearly Meeting Sessions 1991.*

Gifts and Ministries: A discussion on eldership by Alistair Heron. London: Quaker Home Service, 1987. #

"A historical note about Elders in the Society of Friends" by Brian Drayton, 1993.*

Patterns of Eldership and Oversight by Committee on Eldership and Oversight of Quaker Home Service. London: Quaker Home Service, 1997. #

So that You Come Behind in No Gift: Ohio Yearly Meeting's Gathering on Eldering 6/20-22/1996.
Available from Ohio Yearly Meeting.

Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming Gifts of Spiritual Direction by Tilden Edwards. New York NY: Paulist Press, 1980.

Tall Poppies: Supporting Gifts of Ministry and Eldering in the Monthly Meeting, by Martha Paxson Grundy. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #347, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 2000.#

This bibliography is part of a longer listing on ministry and eldering available on the Friends General Conference website. FGCQuaker.org.

*Items marked with * are articles that can be requested from FGC. Items marked with # are available from the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library and the FGC Bookstore.*

are occasions where the person in need of care may not share your understanding. He may not be able, willing, or open to looking at it as an occasion to submit to the sharing the discernment of the Spirit. She may be completely focused on her immediate problem, shut up tight from fear or grief, or he may be defensive about why someone from the meeting wants to talk with him about the matter at hand. But even with a one-sided intention, the care-giver can set a tone of safety and openness, with the hope that all those present may become may be drawn open to the presence of the Spirit.

Below is a description of how the elder's discipline of deep listening might be applied to a occasion of pastoral care.

Putting This into Practice

To exercise deep listening in the context of pastoral care I find it necessary to come to the interaction as an empty vessel or as a vacuum. Beforehand I may visualize myself emptying out, letting go of all my expectations, my judgments, my predetermined sense of outcomes. I want to go into the interaction so empty that my presence acts like a vacuum – drawing the person out, helping to reveal their own truth.

When I am in a session of pastoral care, I visualize a space between myself and the person I am tending. I use this image of space as a place to put whatever comes up in the interactions. (Sometimes I visualize a chasm with no seeable bottom, other times a chalice or a hefty garbage bag.) Whatever comes up, I generally don't want to put it on my shoulders or take it home with me. I want to help draw it out into that space where it can be held in the Light.

The imagined space can also be used to empty myself of anything that is getting in the way of my listening, to continue to create a vacuum to draw out the other person.

In the time before meeting with the person, I will prayerfully hold them or ask God to hold them if I am unable. I do this with the hope that the right outcomes will emerge.

This can be exhausting work. I plan some recovery time for myself after the meeting. I am more able to fully give of myself in the moment if I know I also have planned a time, a place for myself after being in this role. (For me, one of the defining qualities of an elder is some awareness and skill in tending her or his own self care.)

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Time to Renew

Enclosed with this issue of *PCN* is the subscription form for Volume 9, September 2001-June 2002.

Thanks to you, *PCN* has grown from a local publication to one that embraces unprogrammed Quakerism throughout North America and beyond. Writers this year have been from Oregon and New Jersey, Kentucky and Missouri, Minnesota and California. We invite you to propose topics and writers for upcoming issues.

When renewing, remember to order a subscription for *each* member of the committee which provides pastoral care for your meeting. The pricing structure is designed to make it easy to order multiple copies. We ask you not to duplicate copies so that we can fairly share the costs of editing and production.

Thanks for subscribing. We're looking forward to hearing from you in the year to come.

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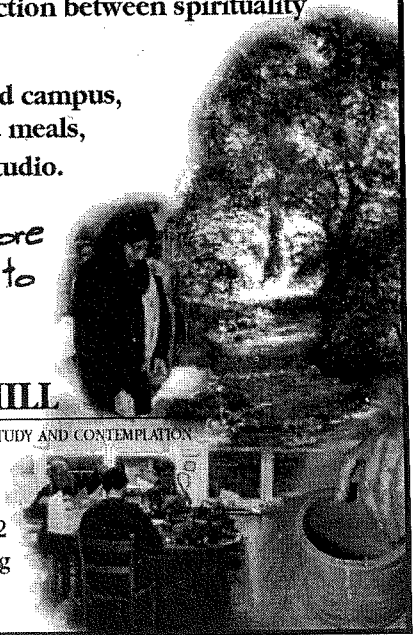
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Quotations on Eldering

Excerpts from "Cambridge Friends Meeting Ministry and Counsel Resources"

If...eldering occurs within the framework of willingly conferred authority, eldering may release great energy both within the individual and within the meeting.
Thomas Brown, in Quaker Life, Jan-Feb. 1983.

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The elders had essentially a nurturing role, and one might say that their voice is embodied in our queries.
Brian Drayton, in "A historical note about Elders in the Society of Friends," 1993.

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An elder who has had experience with many Friends, and who has maintained an inner watchfulness, provides a powerful connection with Truth for the ... Friend in turmoil, confusion, or temptation. Brian Drayton, *ibid.*

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Prayer before, during, and after is essential; God's presence can make all the difference in what is said and what is heard...Finding some quality in the other that we genuinely appreciate or respect and giving voice to it can establish a sense of mutual search where all those involved can feel connected with God. *Emily Sander*

The nurturing aspects of eldering as truth speaking lie in the recognition that one can be definite without being dogmatic....In all cases of truth speaking, the first motion must be love. It is the power and integrity of love as it shows through one's life that must do the convincing in the end. *Samuel Caldwell in Quaker Life Jan-Feb 1983.*

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Historically...because the corrective action or admonition was not always loving and helpful, we first fled from exercising this function, and are only now beginning to grope our way back towards an authentic understanding of it. Our understanding of accountability as Friends rests on the premise that we are members one of another, that we are together members of a greater whole; each of us needs fellow members to enlarge our own understanding, contribute to our nurture, and to help us see what we cannot see ourselves with our own eyes. *Frances Taber in The Conservative Friend, Fall 1996.*

When I conceive of the time spent with another in pastoral care, I listen for the progression of questions to ask. I find it helpful to begin with one that is closer to the surface, then to progress to deeper questions and finally to return to shallow ones again to end the session. In a generalized way, here's how I would anticipate that progression:

Beginning

- Putting the focus person at ease; creating a sense of comfort. (*I am awfully glad you asked for this meeting today*)
- Opening question: (*Let's settle into the silence and when you are ready, perhaps you can speak what brings you here today.*)

Middle

- Deepening questions: (*What do you think Spirit is asking of you here?*)
- Redirecting questions: (*You have said very little about...can you tell us more?*)
- Keeping focused on the issue questions: (*This is important, but I would like to steer us back to...*)
- Coming back to the surface questions. (*I am aware of the time. Is there more that needs to be said here about that?*)

Closing

- Summarizing questions: what seemed important here? (*We've heard this, this and the other thing. You seem very easy about this, less concerned about that than when you came in, and the other thing just isn't going to be resolved tonight.*)
- Re-girding to reenter the world questions. (*Is there anything more you need from us tonight? Is there anything you need to say or do before leaving here tonight? Is there anything you want us to hold in prayer until next time?*)

Advices for Practicing Deep Listening in Pastoral Care

To exercise deep listening requires a certain amount of risk taking, a certain amount of faith. Am I ever fully certain that when I speak in worship that it is truly Spirit-led? No. It is a risk I take in the context of my spiritual community. Am I ever fully certain that the questions I ask as an elder are the "right" ones? No. It is a risk I take in the context of

my spiritual community. So also in pastoral care, I open myself in the guidance of the Spirit, knowing that I may not be sure that what is coming through me is rightly led.

Know that you, too, may make mistakes. You may ask the "wrong question," give half-baked advice. If you are tentative about your ability to discern, don't do this alone. Invite the experience and discernment of others to help you refine your skill.

Know that listening in this way, as an elder would, of being able to be present to another and assist in the drawing out of their highest good, is a gift divine. It is a reality in which you will sometimes be well favored and sometimes you will not. It is a gift that needs to be used humbly and with gratitude.

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Bob Schmitt is a member of Twin Cities Friends Meeting in Northern Yearly Meeting. He has traveled among Friends under concerns for faith & practice, reclaiming the role of elder, and spiritual monogamy (i.e. keeping to a single spiritual path) seeking a rekindling of the fire, that distinguished early Friends. He also hosted the Silent Center at FGC summer gatherings for eight years.

Questions for Reflection

1. Call to mind an experience you've had when another's listening to you drew out an answer you didn't know was inside you. What do you remember about the role the other person played? What kinds of questions were asked? What other factors helped this process along?
2. Call to mind an experience you've had when someone gave you some hard advice – advice that you didn't want to hear but that you knew was true for you. How did that feel at the time? What allowed you to be able to receive it?
3. How do you prepare yourself before entering into an interaction of pastoral care? How do you check yourself as you are doing it?
4. How do you care for yourself after being in the role of pastoral care? How do you address your needs for nurturance so you are able to be a clear vessel while doing this work?

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