

Queries for Ministry and Counsel

Introduction

Our current committees on Ministry and Counsel grew out of early Friends' call to spread the Quaker message and nurture the fledgling worshipping groups that were forming across the English countryside. Traveling ministers were acknowledged spiritual leaders within the Quaker community. They moved through districts where they were often already known, where worshipping communities were eager to engage with the gospel as Quakers understood it. At the same time, Friends were needed to nurture the seeds planted by the traveling ministers. In 1653, William Dewsbury wrote of the hope that in every meeting one or two Friends would be raised up who were "most grown in the Power and the life, in the pure discerning in the Truth" (Dewsbury, *Works*, 1689). These "elders" were to organize regular meetings for worship and to arrange General Meetings. This loose organizational structure developed into meetings of ministers and elders. In addition to participation in their local meetings, the ministers and elders formed a strong and weighty leadership, which met regularly as a distinct body within the Society.

From these meetings of ministers and elder evolved our committees of Ministry and Counsel. In New England these committees are given varying names depending on their function within the meeting, such as Ministry and Worship and Pastoral Care. These committees nurture the ministry and the life within the meetings in order to sustain an engaged and vibrant faith community. They also have care of the overall wellbeing of both the meeting and the individuals within them. When the meeting is strengthened, the individual is nurtured; when the individual is nurtured, the meeting is enriched.

Friends have no creed, but we affirm an Inward Guide, a divine presence, by whatever words we name it—God, Christ, the Inner Light, the Divine, Spirit, the Great Mystery. We are called to be aware and sensitive to the moving of this spirit in our own lives and in the life and ministry of our meeting community. We understand this spirit to be invitational, to be challenging, and to be inclusive, and to call us into community in order to bring this spirit into fuller reality in our daily lives. Ministry and Counsel seeks to be aware of the movement of the spirit within the meeting and its members, in order to be alert to the ways in which the community may need to be renewed, disciplined, refreshed, or enlivened in its spiritual life.

The committee uses faith, trust, openness, and humility. In times of conflict, these disciplines can encourage members to listen attentively to others and to stay in community, waiting on the opening of the spirit. The authority of Ministry and Counsel lies in its ability to discern and articulate God's invitation into a Spirit-guided life.

General Query

How is our reluctance to acknowledge spiritual authority, to accept guidance, and to submit to the discipline of our meetings retarding our growth as a Society?

Queries for Ministry and Counsel

1. Concerning the personal spiritual conditions of M&C members

- a) What have been or are our individual spiritual joys and challenges? How do or have we shared the joys and addressed the difficulties?
- b) What is each of us doing to deepen our own spiritual understanding and sensitivity? What Friends' teachings and practices have helped our spiritual growth? What readings and resources have we found helpful?
- c) To what divine promptings have we each responded? What promptings have we ignored? How can we help each other grow in obedience?
- d) Do we feel any inner resistance to answering these queries honestly and fully? What can we do to increase our own discernment and ability to share with others?

2. Concerning the functioning of M&C

- a) How has the Inward Teacher been leading us within our M&C?
- b) Are we aware of the roles we fill as heirs of the meetings of ministers and elders? What do we do to support each other in the use of our gifts for God's work? Do we actively seek to identify and nurture these gifts in each other?
- c) How do we know when we are being faithful to the work of nurturing worship and personal devotions?
- d) How do we know whether the silence in our worship is merely silence or is well grounded in the spirit and corporate rather than individual?
- e) How do we know whether vocal ministry is given by the Spirit through the individual and is not just personal musings? How do we nurture both vocal ministry and gathered worship?
- f) Have we sensed a developing gift of ministry, eldering, or pastoral care in any of our meetings' members? Have we sensed other gifts in any members? What have we done to encourage the development of those gifts? What more are we called to do, individually and as M&C collectively?

- g) How do we discern how much we can take on both individually and as M&C? How do we support each other in these choices? Do we regularly take time for refreshment?
- h) Do all M&C members regularly attend meetings for worship and business? How do we support and encourage each other in that attendance?

3. Concerning our monthly meetings and their members

- a) How have we kept Friends' beliefs and the reasons for our practices clearly before our members? What else is God calling us to do in that instruction? What is the evidence of spiritual life and growth among all our members, including our youth?
- b) What visits have we each paid to families and individuals active in our meetings? To Friends who are sick, shut-ins, or residents of retirement homes?
- c) What do we each do to make ourselves available to members, attenders, and young people who wish to talk with us? How do we protect the confidentiality of those who speak privately with us?
- d) How have we offered spiritual support to new members? Practical support? How have we encouraged their acceptance into the fabric of the meeting? Where have we fallen short?
- e) What have we done for members who do not regularly attend our meetings? Have we visited those who live locally and are able to attend, encouraged them to come to meeting, and helped with needs they may have? Have we visited, phoned, and written with spiritual support to members who are not able to attend or live far away? What have we learned from these engagements and how have we responded?
- f) How do we discern what is appropriate pastoral care and what is beyond the capacity of the meeting to address? How do we set appropriate boundaries so that members do not become exhausted? Are there services and supports that can come from outside the meeting?
- g) How do we encourage members to bring their life and decisions into the Light of God's love, seeking Spirit-led guidance?

4. Concerning spiritual outreach beyond our meetings

- a) What have we each done to encourage people outside our meetings to know, love, and experience the centering peace and power of the Inward Guide and to embrace its challenges?
- b) In what ways have we followed up with inquirers about and visitors to our meetings? What more would God have us do in outreach?

- c) Of what needs in our wider communities are we as a meeting aware? What are we doing about them?
- d) Does your witness in the world include an invitation to seekers to discover a spiritual home with Friends?

5. Addressing conflict

- a) Do we admit the existence of conflict early and do we approach it as an opportunity for transformation?
- b) Do we recognize that many of our differences are gifts to our community? Are we aware of how respectful conflict and understanding can deepen our individual and corporate growth in the Spirit?
- c) Are we paralyzed by the fear of conflict in our Meetings or do we acknowledge conflict as an opportunity for transformation?
- d) When significant disagreements arise, do we engage in careful discernment of God's will and do we have the courage to act based on that discernment in a timely manner?
- e) When facing difficult issues, how do we support each other, and any other parties involved, in a loving spirit?
- f) Do we intentionally stand together, focused on God's solution rather than worldly expediency? Do we pray together?
- g) Do we acknowledge, together, the barriers to resolution, and trust God to support us in uncomfortable places?
- h) When there is conflict or difficulty, how do we protect the integrity of the meeting for worship, the fabric of the meeting community, and individuals? How do we balance care for the individual with care for the meeting community?