

These notes were prepared by Doug Gwyn following a workshop he gave to Durham Monthly Meeting Friends on December 4, 2016.

NOTES ON BRINGING A MESSAGE IN MEETING FOR WORSHIP

A Quaker understanding of “preaching” or bringing a message to a group of Friends is summarized in a phrase from George Fox: “I brought them to their inward teacher and left them there.” That is to say, a message prepared for meeting for worship should aim to leave the group with hearts and minds prepared for waiting worship. The whole process of a semi-programmed meeting for worship is that each piece of planned activity should serve to gather the group in a spirit of peaceful receptivity to the divine Presence among us. The prepared message is the culmination of that process.

Quakerism as a “listening spirituality” (Patricia Loring): it’s important to honor the good listening abilities of Durham Friends by giving thoughtful, prayerful time and preparation to a message that will take about 15 minutes of everyone’s worship time. Don’t be intimidated, but be serious with this opportunity.

Even bringing the message is more a matter of listening than speaking. It’s the product of both listening for the inner guide, and listening to the Meeting over time.

A prepared message is not so much telling the group “what they need to hear,” but articulating for the group “what they want to say” (Fred Craddock, *Preaching*). That comes through sympathetic listening to many different voices in the meeting over time.

Bringing a prepared message needs to strike a balance between your sense of where the Meeting already is, and what feel led to help them stretch toward. It could be a stretch further outward in social concern and action, or further inward in a deeper spiritual life, or further toward one another. But it needs to be a stretch this group can make. Knowing that means knowing where the group is, trying to speak to that place.

Keep in mind the question, “what’s the good news here?” It’s important not to overwhelm people with the enormity of the world’s problems, but to offer a ray of hope for our personal lives and for how we can work for good.

One good guideline is “the grammar of the gospel” versus “the grammar of the law” (Morris Niedenthal). Law: “if A then B” (“If you do this, the consequence will be that.”) Gospel: “because A, therefore B” (an indicative followed by an imperative). Examples from Jesus and Paul. (e.g. “The kingdom of heaven is at hand; turn around and believe the good news.”) Thus, don’t pile up a lot of moral “oughts,” but point us to the source of spiritual empowerment (within us and among us), then invite us to live into that reality.

Stories are always good, but be sure they really serve your purpose. Keep to the essential details so they don’t take up too much time.

Humor is good, but it needs to serve the purpose of your message, not just to lighten things up.

Drawing on traditions—the Bible, Quaker stories, Quaker Faith & Practice, quotes from spiritual writers, or from other religious traditions (Native American, Eastern, Muslim, Jewish, etc.)—reminds us that people have been struggling with the same dilemmas for thousands of years—great insights come from many different sources.

Leading into waiting worship: Try to find a good segue for the group to turn within to do their own work; e.g., a query, quote, prayer

Different styles: some more logical, linear; others more feeling-based, intuitive, non-linear. All can be good. Just be yourself, speaking to your friends.

Preparation:

Writing a full manuscript is a good idea—our leadings clarify through the words we struggle to put to them. Writing it out also helps us know how long it takes to say what we're led to say

But try to be as free as possible from the manuscript when you speak. Say it aloud once or twice that morning before worship and/or reduce it to a set of points you can check as you speak. In any case, it's important to maintain eye contact as much as possible as you speak.

Finally, know that you are among friends. We're on your side and interested in what you have to share with us. Feel our encouragement—it's always there.

Almost inevitably, you will not be completely satisfied with what you have prepared. You may even feel miserably inadequate to the task you agreed to take on. It is important to set those mixed feelings aside and give the message for whatever it is worth. In other words, get yourself out of the way of the message you have been led to speak. Remember that the meaning of the message is only partly what you intend. The Spirit will guide listeners to receive whatever is useful to them from it. And that will be different from, perhaps even beyond, what you intended. You can thank God for that!

Listeners: Look for an opportunity after worship to feed back something you found useful, something encouraging to the speaker. They have put serious time and intention into their message.

~ Doug Gwyn