

# I Wish Friends Would . . .

by Leonard S. Kenworthy

**A**s Quakers, we often look back on the history of our Society and revel in its past, even though we frequently idealize or glamorize those earlier periods.

Of course, there are merits in such backward glances. But there are also demerits or dangers in lingering too long on what has gone before us. Important as it is to know from whence we came, it is even more important to consider whither we are going. Hence these thoughts on the future of the Religious Society of Friends—my dreams, my hopes, my expectations for the present decade, and even for the first years of the 21st century. My list is long, but individuals and meetings can decide on which points they want to concentrate, realizing that deserts are not brought to life by sponges but by irrigation canals.

Here, then, is my agenda for the future of Friends in the years immediately ahead of us.

**I wish that Friends would . . .**



**. . . realize the enormous potentialities in every human being who lives in the Light, and therefore work assiduously**

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**and creatively to release such possibilities in themselves and in others.**

In my life I have heard scores of sermons and messages on loving God and one's neighbors, but precious few on the other part of that glorious text—"as thyself."

It was the release of their full potentialities that turned the Galilean fishermen from ordinary people into the extraordinary disciples of Jesus, and it was the release of their full capabilities that transformed William Penn, Elizabeth Fry, and John Woolman from insignificant to significant individuals, from lightweight Quakers to weighty Friends.

Surely the release of the full potentialities in people should be our top priority in the years ahead—starting with ourselves.

**. . . consider seriously and prayerfully our desperate need for a vital vocal ministry.**

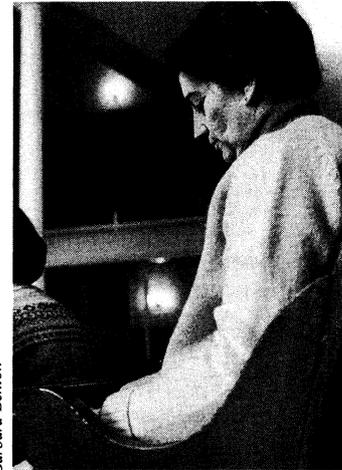
It is crucially important to the future of Friends that we examine earnestly the role of vocal ministry in our meetings for worship on the basis of expectant silence, realizing that the pastoral system developed among Quakers in the United States in the 19th century chiefly because of the lack of a vocal ministry that spoke to the condition of most members and attenders in large parts of our country at that time.

Somehow we need to put into practice our assertion that we have not abolished the ministry, but have eliminated the laity, making all of us ministers.

Undoubtedly there will always be a few individuals who speak more frequently than others in meetings for worship, but ideally everyone should have messages to share from time to time over the years.

This view of the vocal ministry does not diminish our concern about the expectant silence in which we worship. Actually, it enhances that concern because we believe that out of our direct

dialogue with the divine, individually and collectively, inspired and inspiring messages will frequently arise.



Barbara Benton

**. . . experiment with ways of helping Quakers and non-Quakers to worship more effectively in silence.**

Probably the original Quaker method of group worship is the most rewarding form there is for many people. But it is extremely difficult for many, too.

Consequently, a few people seem to grasp immediately, and possibly intuitively, how to conduct themselves in such worship and need little or no instruction. But many others need to learn, at least initially, some techniques. It seems curious—and sad—to this writer that Quakers have ignored the education of their worshipers for nearly 300 years.

Fortunately some such experimentation has gone on in the last few decades, especially in Quaker schools. But even more needs to be done in those institutions, in meetings with a large percentage of new attenders, and even in those with a large percentage of long-time Friends.

**. . . recover our knowledge of the Bible, rediscover the centrality of the life and teachings of Jesus, and appreciate the**

**power of prayer in their lives and the place of public prayer in Quaker meetings for worship.**

It is relatively easy to understand the aversion some people have to the Bible because of the misuse or abuse of it by many Christians. It is also easy to understand the revulsion of many people against the figure of Jesus, largely because of the portrayal of him in their childhood. And it is comparatively easy to understand the inhibitions many individuals have about public prayer.

Nevertheless, these approaches to religion lie at the center of Christianity and of Quakerism. Consequently we will never attain the vitality and authenticity we covet without the discovery or rediscovery of these major sources of spiritual power.

So these three facets of Quakerism need to be aspects on which we work diligently, intelligently, creatively, and prayerfully in the years ahead.



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**... provide a larger place for music, art, and drama in the lives of Friends and of Quaker Meetings.**

I trust we can forgive early Friends for their yielding to the puritanism of their times and their locality. But that decision deprived many generations of the enrichment they could have achieved otherwise as individuals, families, and meetings.

Fortunately, modern Quakers have progressed far in removing those shackles. But much remains to be done to release fully the creativity of individual Friends in these areas and to enrich meetings.

This is another aspect of contemporary Quakerism which needs exploration, especially with children and young people.



Barbara Benton

**... concentrate on the revitalization of our local meetings.**

In the years ahead we will probably be concerned increasingly with the Religious Society of Friends nationally and internationally. Yet the local meeting is the place where we need to work most effectively.

As Rufus Jones once wrote, that group is "the vital cell," "the laboratory of our faith," "the real experimental station of the spiritual life." Surely the top of our pyramid cannot be supported unless it has a strong base.

How much we need to concentrate on those local groups so that they become more truly fellowships of Friends, caring communities, vital cells, and holy experiments, as well as launching pads for social concerns.

**... continue to examine the functions of quarterly meetings.**

For a long time quarterly meetings served several functions in the life of the Society of Friends—including social as well as organizational and spiritual needs. But with changes in society, some people wonder if those units have outlived their usefulness.

Probably we need to continue to explore the possible functions of quarterly meetings. Perhaps all or nearly all Quaker schools and boarding homes need to be under their care rather than of monthly meetings, providing a larger pool of personnel to support and run them. Perhaps many gatherings for young people need to be arranged on this broader basis rather than by monthly meetings. Possibly we need more quarterly meeting newsletters and secretaries.

Indeed there may well be important functions for these units in the years just ahead.

**... narrow the gap between the so-called Christocentric Friends and the so-called Universalist Quakers.**

For those who know Quaker history, there can be no doubt about the Christian foundations of our faith. But there is also a universalist theme in our history, and it is one which needs to be fostered even more in the future than in the past.

Surely those two approaches can be combined, emphasizing a Christian-based Society, reaching out to those of other faiths or religions.



Friends World Committee for Consultation

**... reach out to other groups of Friends in the United States and abroad.**

One of the tragedies of the Society has been our divisions, primarily in the United States, but exported by us abroad.

Organizational unity does not seem feasible in the foreseeable future, but increased understanding and cooperation should be possible. Perhaps we need to recognize most of all that each branch has taken some parts of the original total message of Friends and stressed those tenets and practices, and that different segments of our Society speak to the needs of differing groups of people—

economically, educationally, psychologically, and spiritually.

**... resist the temptation to create larger and larger units.**

An analysis of Quaker beliefs and organization throughout our history seems to indicate that Quakers function most effectively in relatively small groups.

Yet Quakers in the United States have found it difficult in recent decades to resist the temptation to grow larger and larger, with the result that the Quaker atmosphere has often been lost. Such has been the story of Quaker-run hotels and summer resorts, Quaker-run schools and colleges, and some think of the American Friends Service Committee.

Perhaps we need to realize that small is often beautiful.

**... increase our efforts to interpret Quakerism to a wider public than we have done in the recent past.**

It is comparatively easy to understand the inhibitions of some Quakers to proselytize, in view of some of the tactics used by many evangelical Christians. However, it might be rewarding and provocative to examine the early history of Quakerism and to realize how zealous those Friends were in "spreading the Truth" as they saw it. Having had their lives transformed, they felt compelled to share the good news with others.

Some of the inhibitions regarding outreach have been removed in recent years among silent meeting Friends. But certainly much more needs to be done in the foreseeable future to interpret our way of life, our method of worship, and our basic concerns to others, including blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and others in the vast reaches of our country.

**... tackle realistically and creatively some of the major problems of our time—locally, nationally, and internationally.**

Over the decades, Quakers have often been leaders, even more often strong supporters of various movements for human betterment.

But new times bring new or intensified problems, and our current period is no exception. Today we are confronted with such baffling problems as AIDS, alcoholism, crime, drugs, misuse of the

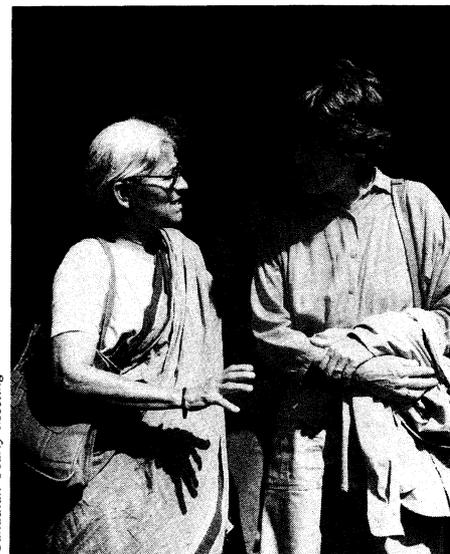
environment, spouse and child abuse—and above all, poverty. (See Leonard Kenworthy's article "Are Quakers Concerned About Poverty?" *FJ* October 1989.)

Of course Friends will not be able to speak clearly, constructively, and creatively on all of these current issues, but they can concentrate on a few on which they can achieve unity and on which they have something especially pertinent to say.

**... would recognize the diversity of sexual preference and apply the Quaker belief in that of God in every individual to people of divergent sexual lifestyles.**

Certainly some progress has been made in recent years among silent meeting Friends in their recognition of the widespread existence of homosexuality and bisexuality, alongside heterosexuality. But much education needs to be fostered in the foreseeable future, with help from such Quaker pioneers in human sexuality as Mary Calderone, Eric Johnson, and David and Vera Mace.

Similarly, we surely need to curb our strident voices as we seek unity in our attitudes toward abortion.



Canadian Yearly Meeting

**... expand our horizons to obtain a spaceship view of the world instead of a porthole view of our planet.**

Throughout their history Friends have had a credible record in this regard, especially in recent decades. Outstanding as that history is, Quakers now need to increase their efforts to gain a planetary perspective and to wrestle with prob-

lems on a worldwide scale, as well as locally and nationally.

That, too, can be difficult, but it can be exciting and rewarding as well.



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**... reflect in our outer lives as well as in our inner beings joy, humor, and a zest for living.**

It was Tom Kelly who wrote that "Christians who don't know an inner Pentecostal joy are living contradictions of Christianity." In another passage he expressed that idea more humorously, saying, "I'd rather be St. Frances hymning his canticle to the sun than a dour, sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have been spiritual persimmons."

Few of us probably picture early Friends as joyous individuals. Yet Elfrida Vipont Foulds has written, "The spirit of the early days of Quakerism will not be fully renewed . . . until the secret of their joy is rediscovered and expressed anew. . . ."

So I covet for myself and for others an inner joy which reflects itself in an outer joy, humor, and a zest for living.

Such are my hopes, my dreams, my expectations for the future of Friends in this decade and in the opening years of the 21st century. It is an ambitious agenda but an achievable one.

What are your dreams, your hopes, your expectations, and those of your meeting, for the future? On which do you and your meeting hope to concentrate? □