

Reviving Quakerism in the New Millennium

Greg Woods

Plenary Talk at LEYM Annual Sessions 2017

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you on such an important topic: Quakers in the New Millennium. I have admired Lake Erie Yearly Meeting for a long time. As a high schooler, I would travel from Missouri to take part in your high school retreats, led by the amazing Kri Burkander. Those retreats have led to lifelong friendships that I still maintain today.

I will be honest and cut to the chase: Quakerism needs to be revived. Earlier this week, as I was working on my talk, I received a notification that a Young Adult Friend, Hye Sung, posted a new blog post. Sadly, it was a blog post where Hye Sung announced that he decided to leave Quakerism. He was inspired to come to Quakerism through the writings of early Friends, saying: “George Fox wrote about the Kingdom of God breaking into this world – and it came from within – this was the gospel I knew, the gospel I needed. Quakers were holy fools, apocalyptic evangelists, soldiers of prophecy. They were about liberation and creating the age-to-come. That was the Spirit I knew. This was the church I longed for.”

Yet after years of being in Quakerism, Hye Sung writes: “What I’ve found, instead, is that Friends have converged on a shared history and a handful of practices.”

I read his post with sadness knowing that I have felt this feeling myself and I have seen others leave Quakerism feeling a similar way as Hye Sung. I must be honest, I have had thoughts of leaving myself, especially as a minister who seeks to be of service to the larger Quaker body and with a family to support. I have thought many times that it could be easier to just go to another denomination and be fully supported. But every time that I try to leave, God keeps calling me back into the fold and it is in Quaker worship that I truly experience the Divine.

If Quakerism is to survive in this new Millennium, we need to stop resting on our laurels about how our forbearers fought against slavery, for suffrage, and so on. Instead we need to recapture the spirit of early Friends. But let me emphasize that this does not mean act exactly like early Friends. Back in 2010, I wrote a blog post titled “If I Wanted to Live By 1600s Standards, I Would be Amish.” It was definitely a tongue in cheek post, but I was also serious. If we are serious about having Quakerism last beyond our lifetimes, we need to see how the Spirit is moving now among us, not how it did back in the 1600s.

My friend, Wess Daniels, earlier this month, gave a talk to the Friends United Meeting Triennial. In his talk on being Publishers of Truth today, he had this to say:

“How happy do you think George Fox or Margaret Fell would be with us if one of them were to show up at the FUM Triennial only to learn that we continued to repeat word for word every line from their journals or papers? That we, in every way, had copied their work so thoroughly

that you could not tell us apart from them? Do you think it was their mission to make mini Fox's and Fell's? Of course not. No one here believes this."

What are our truths? What do we believe as a community? What is our witness in the world today? How are we building the Beloved Kingdom here on Earth? Quakerism is not a do-it-yourself individualistic religion. If it is, why do we even come to Meeting for Worship anymore? Why do we gather for annual sessions? Also, let's remember we are not the Historical Society of Friends or the Peace Society of Friends; we are the Religious Society of Friends. In a sense, we all know we can encounter God when two or more are gathered like it is written in Book of Matthew.

In reviving Quakerism, I see three areas for improvement that I want to touch on today: Deepening Worship, Not Hiding Our Light Under a Bushel (aka Outreach), and Welcoming Newcomers.

I want to focus on Deepening Worship before even talking about outreach and hospitality because we need to know what we are inviting people into before extending the invitation. I think our meeting for worship can be a powerful experience if it is truly gathered. For this to happen, we all need to be prepared for meeting and be present together. But often we fail at preparing for worship. Other times, it does not feel gathered because we are often worshipping as strangers to each other. We lack the intimacy that Quakerism requires for deep worship

I have visited many meetings over the years. Something I have noticed from my travels is that Quakers do not like sitting next to each other. At some meetings, it feels like everyone has their own pew and it would be sacrilege to sit in the same pew as someone else. Sometimes I wonder if a visitor ever assumes that we must not like each other. Once I stopped attending a meeting after faithful attendance of a year and a half because I realized I knew the names of less than half of the people there.

Yet, one of the most powerful meetings for worship I have ever experienced is worshipping at Princeton Friends Meeting in New Jersey after Superstorm Sandy in 2012. That Sunday, the power was still out on the outskirts of Princeton where the meetinghouse sat and it also happened to be a very cold Sunday for the first Sunday of November. But we still gathered together that First Day. Thus, the ones that gathered that Sunday huddled on three benches that were the closest to the roaring fireplace. There, touching others while worshipping, I finally felt connected to a meeting I had been attending for about a year.

Quaker worship requires intimacy in a way that other worship styles do not. Other churches have outward sacraments like baptism and communion, which are forms of intimacy of connecting the church community together in their worship. These churches eat and drink together to remember Jesus' Last Supper with the twelve disciples. But early Quakers felt that these outward forms of sacraments were empty forms and were devoid of meaning in their day, so they abandoned them for the inward forms. They wanted to regain the intimacy of the

early Church that met in houses, not under steeples. Yet through the years we have forgot to practice these inward sacraments or, even, acknowledge these inward sacraments.

What does it look like to practice the sacraments inwardly?

I once heard the Quaker minister and former FGC staff member Deborah Fisch talked about visiting a meeting that was struggling with their worship and not feeling connected with each other. Deborah asked the meeting, "Do you come to meeting for worship expecting to be transformed?"

That is just a powerful question. Are we expecting to be transformed every time we are in gathered worship? For me this is what practicing the inward sacraments come down to: Do we expect the Divine to be in our midst each First Day? How would we prepare differently for worship if we did expect God to be present?

When I was an intern at Princeton University Chapel, I baked the communion bread and it took an hour or two on Saturday evening before each communion service. It was a way to prepare both physically and spiritually for the service the next day. As a faith community that believes each person could be called on to minister, how do we each prepare for the inward communion?

Additionally, Meetings should consider having a table in the center of worship to remind ourselves that we are having communion each Sunday inwardly. Sometimes we need the physical reminder that God is indeed with us and that we are worshipping together as one body, not just individually.

Lastly, we need to disregard the unwritten rules that has kept our meetings, especially unprogrammed meetings, so rigid that sometimes I wonder if we are actually listening to the Holy Spirit. Instead, we need to work on providing a space for the community to gather together to worship the Holy Spirit and await leadings. For example, Freedom Friends Church in Salem Oregon offers people the opportunity to write, read, even play video games as long as they do not bother other people. Their rule is "whatever helps you listen to God, so long as it doesn't distract someone else from listening." A Quaker student group I work with at Appalachian State University in North Carolina sometimes holds Meeting for Worship with an Attention to Coloring. There are people for whom sitting still and quiet for five minutes is not possible, much less an entire hour. Does that make them any less children of God? Make them less worthy to be Quakers?

For myself, I fidget constantly during long periods of silence and I know others who are pretty strained to sit still for an hour, especially some disabled people.

Do we only hear God when we sit in absolute silence and not moving an inch? Has that ever been true? What do our bodies have to do with worship? What role should they play in how we relate to God? Let's remember George Fox had a vision for a people to be gathered after hiking

up Pendle Hill. Are there ways of maintaining the essence of worship while allowing more people to be a part of our communion together so that we can further the diversity of God's Kingdom here on Earth?

In deepening worship, we will deepen our own spirituality and our relationship with each other and the Divine. But, are we ready to be transformed?

Next, some Quakers' least favorite word: Outreach. It is my favorite word because I see our meetings, like many other faith communities, are aging and I would like the privilege of worshipping with others in the manner of Friends until I am the ripe old age. Since we don't have a high birth rate, we need to reach out to others so that Quakerism can continue on. If we don't, we will die out, like the Shakers are about to do.

For some Quakers, when they hear outreach, they think immediately of evangelizing. For me, there are two different things and I wholeheartedly believe in both. Early Friends were very intent on evangelizing. They believe that they had to share their Good News with everyone. Early Friends had the audacity to even try to convert the Pope and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. They risked death proclaiming their belief. Mary Dyer was hung in Boston Commons for not just being a Quaker, but trying to convince others to be Friends.

Early Friends risked jail and death to proclaim the word and today some Quakers debate whether having a booth at a local festival would be too close to evangelizing. Just imagine what George Fox would think of that today, the same person who would disrupt other church services to proclaim the message God had given him.

Instead, outreach is just letting people know that we still exist and no, we are not the Amish. It is about being more visible in the wider community. The Quaker community would benefit if we learn how to talk about our faith.

Do we value our community enough to talk about our faith? I don't think this is not even just important for outreach. How do we expect our youth and newcomers to understand Quakerism if we never talk about what we believe in. I love that many Quakers believe in walking our walk. But we are failing each other if we never talk about our beliefs that influences our walk. We need to start sharing more deeply about what truly compels us to stand up for injustice or to fight against climate change.

Growing up in Quaker First Day school, I learned some Bible stories and some stories about Quakers, but I learned more about other religions and had a great time playing outside. But almost no one ever explicitly talked about their Quaker faith with us, other than social justice issues of the time. As a youth living in a small town on the edge of the Bible Belt, I needed the adults in my meeting to talk with me about what it meant spiritually to be a Quaker and, especially, a Quaker Christian. Growing up I felt estranged from Christianity and felt unable to answer basic questions about Quaker theology besides Quakers believe in peace.

Let me be honest, I don't care if all Quakers are Christian, but we all need to acknowledge that Quakerism came from Christian roots and that early Friends were very devout. We need to teach our youth this history to help guide their spiritual path wherever it may lead. In the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program at Guilford College each year, they teach a class on the spiritual basis for Friends Testimony. As part of the class readings, there are passages from the Bible assigned like the Beatitudes that early Quakers quoted a lot. For many of the unprogrammed Friends, it is the first time they have ever read the Bible or even touch a Bible.

Some of this is from our inability to heal spiritual wounds. During the Vietnam War and since, Quakerism has warmly welcome spiritual refugees who were fleeing harmful spiritual communities, more often evangelical and/or fundamentalist Christian churches. We did a good job of putting out a welcome mat, but we did a bad job of teaching about Quakerism. Out of a fear of offending anyone, we are still not willing to talk about the Christian foundation of early Quakerism in many meeting.

This is important not because we should all read the Bible and become devout Christians, but let's acknowledge where the fiery passion of early Quakers came from to gather people together. We need to be reminded of where this fiery passion came from that started us on this journey that all brought us here today, so we can start discovering where our own fiery passions will come from. Like Howard Thurman, a dear friend of Quakers once said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive." People out in the world like Hye Sung are searching out us Quakers to find that fiery passion, but they find us to be more of a social justice club that sit in silence than a vibrant faith community that seeks to welcome them and keep that fire burning within them.

What is the fiery passion that stirs you in a gathered meeting for worship? What keeps us from sharing this experience from others around us? Why do we want to remain hidden from people who are desperately searching for us?

Hospitality

The last part of my message to you all tonight is about Welcoming People into meetings. In some sense, this should be the easiest one, especially since Friends is part of our name. One of my favorite bumper stickers I see often at Quaker gatherings is "Quakers: We Save Sinners at Potluck Dinners." But yet, I have observed countless meetings do the exact opposite.

I have heard countless stories about how Friends went to a new meeting and no one even talked to them after worship. I have that happened to me too. My wife, Jenn, who did not grow up Quaker, is always surprised when this happens to us in our travels. This happens a lot to young adults. A clerk at a big meeting on the East Coast when confronted about Young Adult Friends not feeling welcome at his meeting said that it was a waste of time to learn Young Adults' names because they never stayed around. Yes, we won't stay around if we are treated

like that. Other times young adults are often asked if they are in college when they are more than 30. Young adults are not just college-age.

But this treatment does not only happen to Young Adult Friends. The Quaker author Brent Bill once told me about visiting a big meeting for Meeting for Worship and no one spoke with him at all before or after meeting. I can almost guarantee you that the meeting has at least one book by him in their library.

The question of how should we welcome people into our meetings does not have one simple answer. And I don't even think that is the question that we should be asking. Instead, let's ask ourselves, "How do I feel welcome when coming into a new space?" This is not an abstract question. It is about meeting human needs of feeling welcomed and valued.

One time I was visiting First Friends Meeting of Indianapolis. There they give every visitor a mug with the name of the meeting, a Quaker postcard that is intentionally blank, and some kind of candy or baked good. Another time I visited a Mennonite congregation in West Philadelphia. Before the service started, a couple said hi and asked my name and what brought me to their community that Sunday. Then, during the service, when it was time to introduce visitors to the congregation, this couple introduced me to the community. How can your meeting be more proactive in welcoming visitors and helping them feel more comfortable?

In talking about welcoming others, we also need to be honest about ourselves on the topic of race. We need to tackle the legacy of racism in our midst and the current ways we have allowed racism to continue to exist in our meetings. Quakerism in the United States and Canada is primarily white and it does not need to be. How can we open our meetings to people of color?

I have heard justifications, like black people don't like silence, and statements like these are sending people of all races running from our meetings, like Hye Sung. In his blog post, he writes, "I've met others who need a Spirit-led Society. We share this vision, and we share the disappointment of being drowned out in meeting by classism, ageism, and racism."

This is not the time either for anti-racist white people to pat themselves on the back either. This is a call for us to all journey with each other, not a time to point fingers or to celebrate who was anti-racist first. My own journey to be anti-racist has shown me it takes years for personal change, so why should I expect others to change overnight? But we need to start this journey sooner than later. How can we build the Beloved Kingdom here on Earth with only people who look and act like this?

Yes, we need to be building the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Our meetings are shrinking and we are growing collectively older, but people are still searching for us. This is one reason I am starting a campus ministry to non-Quaker campuses. I believe that if we are more visible in public everyday life, more people would be interested in what we have to offer.

Before we get too far into this Kingdom-building work, we need to deepen our collective worship practice, work on how to reach out so others beyond our meetinghouse walls know that we even exist, and finally learn how to be more welcoming of all who grace our doors.

I want to see Quakerism be revived in this new millennium. We have a radical message to share with the world about how we are all ministers who are able to be called by God to serve. Let's stop hiding our Light under a bushel. If we do, it will burn out one day, definitely sooner than later!

But I am not ready for that and hope you are not either! We have some hard work ahead of us in this age of darkness but I know we can do this. Like George Fox's vision of an infinite ocean of light and love conquering the ocean of darkness, let's go wade into this ocean and invite others to join us there in building the Kingdom!