

RESOURCES FOR RENEWAL

Open Worship

Adapted from a pamphlet by Stan Thornburg

"Friendly" suggestions for making sense out of the silence and ministry of open worship:

Help! What is supposed to happen during the silence of open worship? Is there something I should be doing? How does one listen for God's voice? So much of the time God's voice sounds

just like my own voice—so how can I tell the difference? How does one know when and whether to speak during open worship? How can I get the most out of open worship?

These are wonderful questions to ask because they reflect a desire to learn, grow and authentically encounter Jesus Christ in times of open worship. This desire is often the drawing of one's heart toward the inward presence of Jesus Christ. And the one who is faithful to pursue such a drawing is seldom, if ever, disappointed.

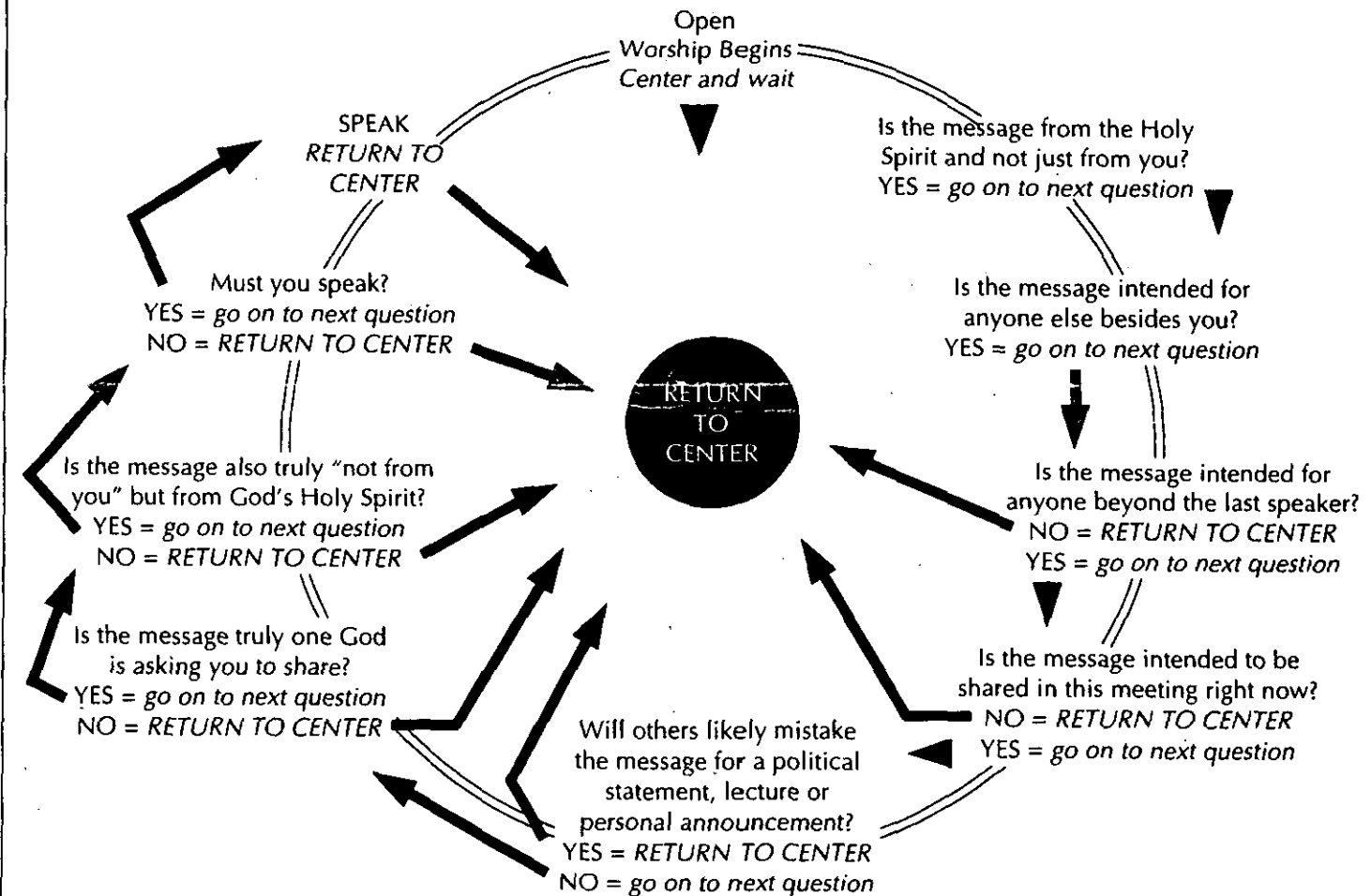
Worship after the manner of Friends is a group exercise rather than just an individual experience. Therefore, the quality of worship depends on the

faithfulness of those gathered to share in their openness to the Holy Spirit, and to obey leadings as God speaks. Since such worship is a learned faculty, Friends approach it with a sense of sharing in a mutual quest for an authentic and powerful experience of God.

At the center of Friends worship is the core belief in Jesus Christ as "present teacher." This means a belief that Jesus Christ is present with worshipers to teach, lead and reveal truth. Terms such as "the inward light," the "light of Christ," "that of God within" and the "Holy Spirit" refer to that presence of Jesus Christ as our present teacher.

The task of Friends worship is to "mind the light" which means to focus

Deciding to Speak in Open Worship



on Jesus Christ as inward teacher, being careful to distinguish between insights that come from Him and those generated from one's own thinking and feelings. Since this task is seldom an easy one, Friends enter worship with a sense of humility and tolerance of one another.

Worship after the manner of Friends flows through four stages: *Centering, Gathering, Ministry* and *Exercise*. These stages are not, of course, equally divided in time nor are they often acknowledged directly in the worship service, but over time one learns to be aware of each stage.

Centering

Most of us come to worship with a lot on our minds. Therefore, it is natural that during periods of silence our minds turn to these personal concerns, creating "clutter" or distractions that tend to hinder worship. The act of centering is the tool Friends use to get past these distractions.

To "center" means to focus one's awareness upon the presence of Jesus Christ. Centering allows all distracting concerns to slip into the background while thoughts and impressions of Jesus Christ are allowed to fill one's mind.

Many people find that silent prayer, reading from the Word of God, or reading a hymn from the hymnal at the beginning of open worship focuses their attention onto Jesus Christ's presence in a way that centers them.

Gathering

In Quaker terminology a "gathered" worship service is one in which there is a sense of being connected with other worshipers and centered with them in the awareness of Jesus Christ's presence. Being gathered speaks of being aware of a spiritual unity among those in worship and a mutual participation in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

It is sometimes easiest to recognize when a worship service is not gathered, for such a service carries a sense

of scatteredness. But when a meeting is gathered there is a prevailing sense of direction and/or order present.

One cooperates in the process of gathering by including an awareness of the other worshipers in one's focus upon Jesus Christ. Some find it helpful to look around the sanctuary (or wherever the worship service is being held) and, without focusing on any one individual, create a sense or feeling of cooperating with them in the adventure of worship.

Ministry

The silence of open worship is not empty silence. During the silence there are heroic things happening. The Holy Spirit is gently nudging each person in worship toward a central truth. The gathered worship service is the way of discerning that truth, and ministry is the way that truth breaks the silence and is acknowledged.

Occasionally one feels nudged by the Holy Spirit to stand and speak out of the silence. Ideally such vocal ministry explains or enlarges upon the truth the Holy Spirit has revealed in the hearts of the worshipers. Such ministry is powerful and helpful.

Occasionally vocal ministry will seem to "clash" or will seem in disharmony with the sense of direction one feels in worship. When that happens, Friends learn to put such ministry aside and to refocus on the inward presence of Jesus Christ.

Exercise

Often the ministry, either vocal or inward, will engage one's spirit, drawing one to some act of obedience such as repentance of sin, a deeper commitment to Jesus Christ, or embracing a new truth. Such leadings can be experienced individually or by the whole assembly.

This sense of being thus engaged is the "exercise" of the Holy Spirit. It is in this exercise that lives are transformed, Friends are called to acts of ministry,

evil or self-destructive behavior is exposed and condemned, and the life of obedience and spiritual maturity moves a step toward Christ-likeness. This is the "work" of worship and the fruit of corporate attention to the voice of Jesus Christ.

Even those Friends who are most experienced in worship often question their leadings to speak out of the silence of open worship. The chart, on the reverse, is meant to offer guidance in discerning whether to speak in open worship or remain silent. In the end, however, each worshiper is encouraged to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit as he or she experiences it.

This is an adaptation of a pamphlet written by Stan Thornburg and published by Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, Oregon. The chart first appeared in Friendly Woman, November, 1990.

Reprinted April 1998 for Wider Quaker Fellowship, a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia PA 19102-1498 USA, phone (215) 241-7293, fax (215) 241-7285.

Quaker Life is a religious magazine published by Friends United Meeting (Quakers) ten times annually (January-February and July-August issues combined).

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Friends United Meeting commits itself to energize and equip Friends through the power of the Holy Spirit to gather people into fellowships where Jesus Christ is known, loved and obeyed as Teacher and Lord.