

Vocal Ministry – What is it? Where does it come from?

A report on London Dialogue 19, organised by the Quaker Universalist Group in conjunction with London Quakers, 25th April 2015.

Speakers: Rex Ambler, Alec Davison, Janet Scott and Michael Wright.

Approximately 70 Quakers gathered at Friends House to listen to four speakers addressing the question of vocal ministry. The advance publicity stated: *Vocal ministry has always been a key-stone of Quaker worship and our present day understanding of vocal ministry goes to the very heart of what we think Quakerism today is, or should be, all about*. Each speaker was allocated 20 minutes; there was a short period for questions at the end. The presentations were all given with sincerity and mutual respect. This report can only give a brief indication of what was said in a very full and inspiring afternoon.

1) Rex Ambler

Rex Ambler suggested that our practice of speaking out of silence is unique, at least in the Western world, and we need a constant reminder of what we are doing. Even in the seventeenth century the practice was distinctive and against the grain of the time. He quoted from Quaker Faith and Practice, including 2.60: *But ministry is not the place for intellectual exercise. It comes through us, not from us The Spirit will decide which experiences are relevant and which will speak to the condition of the meeting. If you have to decide whether it is right to speak, consider that it isn't. If your words are important the meeting will find them anyway.*

Too often today people use the silence as a place to think about miscellaneous issues. Greater attention should be paid to teaching us what to do in the silence. What we actually DO is more important than concern about theistic language. William Penn recognised that wisdom was internal and did not rely on priest or book. The Light gave a person the capacity to see things as they really are – uncomfortable though this may be – and to discern whether the words that came to them were true.

2) Janet Scott

The point of silence is to hear the Word and the point of hearing the Word is to live it. Her talk was presented as a meditation on the Word of God and how to recognise it. She referred to Quaker Faith and Practice 29.17 written by Young Friends under the care of the Friends World Committee for Consultation. This includes the sentence: *Our priority is to be receptive and responsive to the life-giving Word of God, whether it comes through the written word – the Scriptures, the Incarnate Word – Jesus Christ, the Corporate Word – as discerned by the gathered meeting, or the Inward Word of God in our hearts which is available to each of us who seek the Truth.*

The Word may sometimes surprise us. We need to see love in action and Paul suggests we recognise its genuineness by the fruits it bears.

3) Michael Wright

Michael Wright came to Quakers 15 years ago and was surprised by how little instruction was available. He was expected to pick up Quaker values by osmosis. Not many extracts in Quaker Faith and Practice were relevant for him but he quoted 2.66: *Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one's mind. It's what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity,*

divinity and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind.

While emphasising that ministry is not an intellectual exercise, Michael Wright said that he no longer found the metaphor of God to be true for him. He was incredulous that any divine spirit, should such there be, would choose to speak through him. Silence allows the noise to fall away. Meeting provides a natural human communal experience in which we draw strength from each other and no supernatural explanation is required. He now reinterprets the traditional components of prayer as used in his Anglican days (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication) as Awe, Concerns, Thankfulness and Self-examination.

4) *Alec Davison*

‘We are not a Trappist order based on silence or a liturgical one. We are a priesthood of all believers where every one of us is to share what we have found. Ours is the way of dialogue’. Alec Davison spoke with passion about the need for revising and re-visioning Quaker practice. Those who come newly to Quakers, perhaps following outreach, are often disappointed by what they find. Ministry is bland, lacking inspiration, veering into the political or therapeutic. There is a need for teaching and leadership but in acceptable ways. Some resources currently available are: Woodbrooke, Quaker Life, spiritual nurture from the arts, the Experiment with Light (in his view the most significant addition to Quaker practice in the 20th century), Quaker Quest for outreach and Kindlers for in-reach.

The Kindlers are carrying out action research on days of dialogue in which participants have the opportunity to talk freely and get to know each other better. These have been well received. Alec made two proposals:

- a) Two trainers to be selected from each area meeting and these in turn would work with two trainers from each local meeting to provide these days of dialogue.
- b) Increase the length of the usual Quaker Meeting to 1¼ hours by offering half an hour of programmed explanation and learning followed by three quarters of an hour of worship.

He said there is a famine calling for spiritual nurture. We need teaching and a travelling ministry. Vocal ministry is our rehearsal to speak to the world.

Conclusion

Reactions to the afternoon’s presentations have been very positive. The speakers were diverse in their views but all agreed on the value of the silent meeting and all agreed that at best vocal ministry was drawn from a deeper level of consciousness, beyond the purely intellectual. Explanations of the impulse to speak were varied. Janet Scott believed she received direct guidance from an external God; Michael Wright viewed the promptings of love and truth in our hearts as a natural phenomenon. Alec Davison spoke of the creative spirit known to artists, scientists and others when an idea comes into consciousness and they are unable to tell how it has arisen. He viewed ministry as an example of this universal creativity. Rex Ambler emphasised that the quality of the silence was more important than opinions about its source.

All speakers have agreed that their presentations – possibly expanded – can be published so look for a Kindlers pamphlet later in 2015.

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