

## **Eldership at the heart of our Quaker Community in Britain:**

### **Our past and our future**

#### **The Challenge**

Quakers in Britain today often talk of being at a crossroads, only too aware of our diminishing number which currently stands at around 15,000 and is predicted to dwindle to extinction by the fourth decade of the twenty first century. There is often a call for a prophetic voice, a hunger for a radical change which will reverse this trend, a call for spiritual and practical renewal. Friends look back over our history searching for parallels from which we might draw comfort or seek out that prophetic voice amongst our community here and now. The Friends Quarterly 2009 prize essay competition is an example of such a quest, reminding us of the essay of John Stephenson Rowntree in 1859 when he posed the question:

Has Quakerism a future? - may it yet rise phoenix-like from its ashes, learn experiences from the errors of the past and enter a brighter and happier course or is it doomed to a continuance of its present decrepitude – to a progressive decay, involving its untimely end at no very distant period? (Rowntree 1859 pp187)

In addressing the causes of our decline, be it in the twenty first century or the nineteenth the task can seem what Rowntree describes as 'a somewhat ungrateful one' (pp 162). We could focus on everything that is going well in our Society, on the strength and influence on our witness, on the relevance of our 'truth' today, on the depth and joy of our communities and on the inspirational lives and writing of individual Friends but in doing so we may complacency and a tendency to cling to what is familiar in the face of uncomfortable truths.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a single transatlantic Quaker culture maintained by the tradition of travelling ministers, but this became fragmented during that century with defection and schisms on both sides of the Atlantic. By the end of the century British Friends were in large part united within one yearly meeting whereas there was a proliferation of different groups and yearly meetings within North America. (Dandelion 2007) John Stephenson Rowntree wrote his seminal essay in the midst of this fragmentation. When we examine the state of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain today we are in danger of forgetting that we too are members of a worldwide family of Friends with enormous diversity in the way in which we express our 'Quaker Way', and this examination of eldership within our Society is written in the context of our membership of that family; our community in its widest sense.

We are part of a group of liberal unprogrammed and increasingly pluralist Friends, which encompasses theist and non-theists, Christocentric and universalist Friends as well as those who prefer no label. We practise silent worship, placing primary authority on experience rather than belief. This Quaker tradition is practised predominantly in parts of the USA, mostly on the eastern and western seaboard, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the rest of Europe, South Africa and Japan (Dandelion 2008)

There are challenges which we face as a Society for the first time. Our numbers are dwindling and our population ageing, a trend which we share with other Christian churches in this country. We live in what is often described as a secular society. There is no longer a tradition of our faith being passed on from generation to generation as if carried within our genes. An increasing number of Quakers come to us by conviction, and the hugely successful Quaker Quest programme brings new seekers into our midst who are not steeped in our traditions and our ways. Our willingness to be open to new light from whatever direction it may come means that our community draws on the disciplines of several different faiths. Afraid of causing offence to each other, we may say nothing. Our Quakerism may have become thin, diluted, even meaningless.

We are already responding to some of these challenges. Individual meetings are exploring ways of introducing those attracted by Quaker Quest to our practices by holding separate meetings for worship for newcomers, where large well established meeting might stifle new shoots of verbal ministry or by providing mentors, or by running study programmes. Courses for new attenders are run at Woodbrooke, Swathmoor Hall and Charney Manor. It has been suggested that the prophetic voice may already be in existence. 'A Framework for Action 2009 – 2014,' published by Meeting for Sufferings after widespread consultation in Britain, has been called prophetic. (Meeting for Sufferings 2009, p8) Its fundamental first priority is to 'Strengthen the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves'. Yearly Meeting Gathering 2009, a new kind of gathering of Friends in Britain, brought together 1,700 Friends who formed a strong community within a residential setting and amazed itself by finding a truly prophetic voice over same sex marriage.

At other times we are nervous, unsure how to proceed. We are careful not to offend or exclude those whose beliefs are not our own by the use of language. We apologise often before, during and after we speak of God, the divine, the Spirit, the great mystery, the Inner Light. Such apologies suggests a lack of conviction and certainly do not convey the power and authority of our direct experience within worship, the very core of our Quakerism. We may indeed be silent when we should speak. Maybe silence comes too easily to us and when we choose not to speak that which is at the heart of our beings we prevent the rich exploration that might result from sharing. For Quakers silence is a natural medium but we need to be aware of its dangers which are highlighted by the recent work of Tim Ashworth and Alex Wildwood:

One of the problems we sought to address on the project is that this tension can easily remain hidden and unexpressed among Friends, both through fear of conflict and division because the silence that is so central to Quaker worship may be masking real differences of which Friends are unaware. (Askworth and Wildwood 2009 p9)

We find it difficult to express our spiritual experience in language which is adequate and this limits both the experience itself, because we have become used to using language to make sense of the world, and also our ability to communicate our experience to others. In our silence we lose an opportunity for growing together. We are silent individuals rather than members of a seeking community.

The core of our Quakerism rests on our direct experience of the divine, an inward spirituality but one that is lived out in a community which supports us, and through which our witness is

expressed; it has an individual and corporate dimension. Ursula Jane O'Shea captures this perfectly when she states:

Our task is to inaugurate the way of God in this time and in this land; our tools are our personal experience of the Light Within, and our corporate experience in using collective guidance to discover and enact God's will in the world. To do this we must not become more like early Friends, but more like ourselves as we are in the eye of God. (1993 p14)

So how can we embrace our pluralism as a strength? How can we use our language to truly express our experience and our common identity, how can we truly listen to each other, how can we build our community as a source of spiritual strength and from which our corporate witness can flow? How can we find our prophetic voice?

## **The Elder within the Community**

While we should not seek to become more like early Friends, it is helpful to look at what has sustained us as a Society over the past 350 years. From the earliest time the Light was seen to guide not just the individual but the whole community. This was particularly true in worship, bringing with it a communal life which was both ordered and unified. This was further strengthened and formalised by George Fox in the structure which is still with us today, through which our worship occurs, our business is conducted, individual concerns are tested and from which our witness and testimonies flow.

Our communities are far more than an organisational structure, they are the living breathing heart of our spiritual life. We draw together in worship seeking inspiration and divine guidance as we wait in the Light, as Thomas Kelly put it 'as if we found our separate lives were all one life'. (Quaker Faith and Practice 2.36, 1994)

At this crucial time in the Society of Friends, when we face the challenge of our future we have a choice, to strengthen our roots and reclaim our authority to speak of the power of Spirit or we continue to be apologists, widening our inclusiveness to those who have no expectation or wish for our corporate spirituality and afraid to speak of our experience of divine inspiration. If we choose to capture again our authentic voice we need the faithful groundedness of spirit led eldership which can underpin all that flows from our community of faith. If we do not we face the possibility of being simply no different from the local horticultural society.

Our direct experience of God comes from a life grounded in this community, but what nurtures and sustain it? Although we had abolished the priesthood we are not without leadership. From early days three separate leadership roles emerged within meetings: ministers had charismatic authority, elders exercised discernment, and overseers exercised pastoral care. Historically, elders were identified as early as 1653 when William Dewsbury suggested that a few elders, 'well grounded in the truth', be appointed for each meeting.

An elder was seen as a seasoned Friend, experienced in the inward life and in knowledge of the spiritual path, 'who has maintained an inner watchfulness, [and who] provides a powerful connection with Truth for the minister or other Friend in the turmoil of leading, confusion or temptation' (Drayton in Grundy 1999 p.10).

In summary the breadth of eldering responsibility was enormous; nurturing the meeting for worship, encouraging ministers, overseeing accountability, giving care and spiritual guidance. These responsibilities put elders at critical points in the communities life of gospel order. The eldering ministry was the church's way of nurturing the meeting community as an expression of God's presence in the world. (Cronk 1991 p.37)

Regardless of our Quaker tradition the following activities of elders can be recognised by Friends from around the world:

- provide an anchor for life in the Spirit, elders' knowledge of the spiritual path enables them to provide nurture for individuals;
- be particularly mindful of the particular needs of individuals within the meeting who may be ill, dying or bereaved;
- support Friends in listening to the Spirit in meetings for worship and business. Although elders may rarely speak in meeting they have an important role in centring and upholding the worship;
- ensure that meeting for worship is facilitated by practicalities such as quiet gathering, arrangement of the space, and the ending of the meeting;
- act as companions to ministers as they travel under concern. Elders' experience in discernment meant that they provided a counterbalance to the minister, grounding them and testing the authenticity of their message;
- draw out the message in inexperienced ministers and encourage gifts and leadings throughout their meetings, and to support and ensure the right ordering of clearness committees;
- provide guidance for those whose verbal ministry appears self-serving rather than Spirit-led;
- encourage accountability within their communities for the ways in which we live our lives corporately and individually;
- ensure that there are opportunities for learning and growth in the Spirit within their communities, paying particular attention to the needs of children and young people; and
- take responsibility for the right holding of meeting for worship on special occasions such as marriages, funerals, and meetings for celebration and blessing.

(Routledge 2008)

Thus elders stand at the core of our worshipping community, keeping a watchful brief on our corporate life. To be an elder is to be given the power to lead and support our communities. There are many examples of Spirit-led eldership, of quiet dedicated service to our meetings,

but there is a capacity for far more to be done, not in the number of tasks required but for us to nurture and support our elders so that they in turn support the meeting in growth. We need a clarity and confidence that come from those well grounded in the Spirit.

There have been calls to return afresh to the positive and spiritual roots of eldership (Larrabee 2007, Grundy 1999). If we as elders come from a sacred place, rooted and grounded in love and truth, then our eldership ministry will be spirit-led. Though words may sometimes be inadequate to describe spiritual experience, Margery Larrabee explains her understanding of spirit-led eldering thus:

The closest I can come to explaining Spirit-led eldering is to refer to its essence, which is grace filled. It is a sacred point of view ... [which] helps us to regain our capacity for being spiritually faithfully connected to the Spirit and to each other ... It is offering spiritual leadership ... It is the well grounded intention and attitude of a compassionate heart and mind, led by Spirit. (Larrabee 2007 p.3)

## **An Exploration of Eldership**

I was a resident student at Pendle Hill, the Quaker study centre in Philadelphia, in 2008. While I was there I found myself led to explore the topic of eldership through talking to Friends from around the world, and by reading and writing. The question that emerged was: given that there are considerable differences in the administrative frameworks within which elders operate depending on their Quaker tradition, is there a practice of eldership which transcends these differences? What emerged was a developing sense of an archetypal role of eldership which transcended Quaker traditions. I also began to identify areas in which new shoots of eldership were emerging. When I returned to Britain I continued conversations with experienced Friends both individually and through presentations to Area Meetings. My interviews were conducted in a keen spirit of enquiry but without methodological rigour, so no generalisations can be drawn. I am engaged therefore in a personal exploration of the practice of eldership within the Religious Society of Friends. This experience has led me to see clearly the rightful and vital role of our elders in renewing and strengthening our spiritual roots.

I found that although we might have different patterns of appointment for elders, we have a common understanding of their role. This depends neither on the way they are named nor on their length of tenure. Friends whom I interviewed recognised the role of elder in all the dimensions which are described here, though the ways in which Friends took up their eldership role differed. All spoke of a hunger for revitalising the role of elder, a hunger which is bubbling up within the Religious Society of Friends here and now. This is reflected in the recent writing of Margery Larrabee and Martha Grundy (Larrabee 2007, Grundy 1999). I also found excitement and confidence as old practices are revisited, reclaimed and reinterpreted for our current generation.

We are concerned here with the demise of British Quakerism, but we need to be mindful that we are members of a world family of Friends (see above). Even the broad divisions of evangelical, conservative and liberal traditions hide many similarities between us. In British Quakerism we can recognise those who are evangelical and those who are more traditionally conservative Christians. We have elements of programming in our meetings for worship, for instance in the readings of Advices and Queries, with the inclusions of readings and songs when engaged in all-age worship, at weddings and at funerals. I was shocked when an American Friend at Pendle Hill accused British Friends of having an altar. For a

moment I could not understand what she meant – it was the table with flowers, the Bible and Quaker Faith and Practice! We do not maintain the symbolism of the empty space in the centre for the presence in the midst as they do. Tissues and Friends Hymnal however, are commonplace in the USA. Trying to attribute differences between practices to different Quaker traditions is arbitrary and confusing. The more one explores the subject with individual Friends, the more one becomes aware that practice not only varies between traditions and from yearly meeting to yearly meeting, but also between our Sunday worshipping communities which may be only a short distance apart. It is not just that we should accept our differences: it is more that we have a responsibility not to talk up those differences, and rather to seek out in love what we share.

Eldership is often defined either by the responsibilities which elders traditionally undertake or by the qualities which they are expected to show. It is said to be crucial to the maintenance of gospel order. Gospel order is understood differently on either side of the Atlantic, though both understandings relate to George Fox's original structure, described above which underpins our beloved community. In the United States the term is used 'to gather together many of the most significant elements of church-community' (Cronk 1991 p.3), and Lloyd Lee Wilson describes it as 'an organizing principle by which Friends come to a clearer understanding of our relationship with God in all of the divine manifestations and of the responsibilities of that relationship' (Wilson 1993 p.4). In Britain the interpretation of the term is much more limited, as 'gospel order' refers to the establishment of meetings for church affairs where individual insights were tested against the insight of the gathered group (Quaker Faith and Practice 1994 19.49). I use the term here not to mean the structural framework within which the Religious Society of Friends operates, but to describe a covenanted relationship with God, one in which Friends live out their direct experience of God. Gospel order was never an individual way of life but one which required a community through which to live in a new order. It enabled the worshipping community to see and accept God's gifts, and to see how their faith was to be lived out in testimony and witness.

Eldership has a bad name in some communities. The verb 'to elder', as one of my interviewees reported, has come to mean to criticise or condemn. Many Friends report with great pain occasions on which an elder criticised their verbal ministry in meeting many years ago. Some who have left the Society permanently or for a period of some years will, with great bitterness, attribute their departure to the negative words of an elder in such circumstances. Elders appointed for life have been seen as overpowerful. This has caused division particularly when those in positions of leadership have been middle class and wealthy. Visitation by elders to families during the Quietist period were sometimes seen as over draconian, more concerned with form than devotion.

The ways in which eldership is undertaken are crucially important to our communities and rely not on accepted procedure but on our relationship with the divine. We should ask 'What does love require of us?', 'How should we love our meeting and the individuals within it?', 'How well do we know each other in the things that are eternal?'

My exploration highlighted four areas of eldership in which new shoots are emerging in the Religious Society of Friends today; all represent a reclaiming of the traditional practice of elders and its reinterpretation for the Society today. Together they encompass much of the totality of the responsibility of elders and there are undoubtedly others. These four areas are:

- **Accompaniment for travelling ministers**
- **Accountability amongst Friends**
- **Nurturing spoken ministry**
- **Spiritual nurture**

In exploring these topics (which have been and are now expressed in the language of their time) with Friends I have found that use of some words present Friends with insuperable problems. They often reflect a more authoritarian time or Christian tradition and, for some who have been hurt by association with such authority, the language may prevent them from exploring new interpretations or meanings of important concepts. Or they may be seen to be 'Quaker jargon', at its worst acting as a barrier to an elite organisation. However, there may be a precise meaning for these words which may not have an easy or exact alternative. The words themselves may have developed over time a particular meaning which goes beyond their lay definition. It may be that we need to decide whether we reclaim these words to be our own, or that we find alternative expressions which are as close as we can come to our understanding of the words used. An exploration of our use of words in this way is a useful discussion for us to have not only for the benefit of newcomers but to challenge us to express our true meaning.

### **Accompaniment for Travelling Ministers**

Just as elders were named and appointed early in the history of the Society, so were ministers. Ministers were recognised as having particular gifts, being channels through which the spirit could speak to the condition of an individual or community. The historical pattern was that travelling ministers were accompanied by an elder. Pure practicalities of the difficulties of travel made this desirable, and the practice promoted the importance of the message above that of the minister. Ministry should be very much a communal experience, a team effort, dependent not only on the minister but also on the elder to uphold, nurture and support the minister's preparation and delivery, and to support the gathering and centring of the meeting. Ministry is also dependent on the spiritual health of the community itself, and on the readiness of Friends to come with hearts and minds prepared, listening for the Spirit both in spoken ministry and in the ministry of silence.

In parts of the liberal unprogrammed tradition in the USA the practice of formally appointing elders ceased in the early nineteenth century, though it continues today in the unprogrammed conservative tradition. In Britain the practice of recording ministers continued until 1924. Travelling ministry did not necessarily mean that the minister went very far from home, nor that the minister would necessarily speak more frequently or at greater length than others in the meeting. The minister may also have had no idea of the message that has to be conveyed; rather, s/he had felt a concern to travel and this had been tested, either individually in a clearness committee or by due process of being appointed by a meeting, or both.

The roles of minister and elder were at one time seen as separate and mutually exclusive,

so a Friend could not be registered as an elder and a minister at the same time. If an elder strayed towards ministry then they would no longer be recorded as an elder but as a minister. There were clear distinctions between the two roles. Since the end of recording of ministers in Britain and the introduction of triennial appointments there has been a merging of the expectations of the roles. Elders have often interpreted their responsibility for spoken ministry as an opening for speaking it themselves rather than drawing out the gifts of ministry within a minister and within a meeting.

Recently the practice of an elder accompanying a travelling minister has resurfaced. Jan Hoffman describes her experience of travelling in the ministry and explains how she was led to seek, and how her receiving community was led to provide, eldership for her journey in the ministry (Hoffman 1999). Her travelling ministry has led to a resurgence of accompanying elders, bringing a mutual growing in the Spirit for the minister and the elder, and growth in the power of the resulting ministry. Those who travel in this way speak of a deeply spiritual friendship which results from 'knowing each other in the things that are eternal.' In some circumstances Friends may act as ministers and elders reciprocally on the same journey, but not on the same occasion.

In the recent resurgence of this role the elder has been likened to a midwife, birthing the ministry from the minister. Elders have knowledge and skills to ensure the safe birth of the message, knowing complications which can arise and emergency procedures which may be needed. A minister may become angry or stuck in this preparation and, without an elder present, cannot go to that elusive place from which ministry may flow. In the view of one travelling elder whom I interviewed, the more the role is named and explained, the more it becomes developed and strengthened. An elder will also know when the ministry is lost. On one occasion an elder accompanied a Friend on a three-day train journey and, although the Friend worked unceasingly on his address, he eventually told his elder that he had many words but nothing to say. The Friend's predicament continued until five minutes before his ministry was due to begin when, in worship with the clerk and the elder, the clerk ministered and the message became clear. The Friend then delivered the message powerfully.

For those experiencing accompanying eldership as minister, elder or as a member of the meeting, the presence of the elder makes a significant difference. Those who ministered spoke of their sense of being upheld and of being able to go deeper in their ministry coming closer to their true calling. Those who accompany they also experience a rich and rewarding journey in which they learn much. One Friend expressed what she had gained:

'My conclusion to the group was that I felt that upholding is really about trust - trusting the process, trusting the Spirit, trusting each other and trusting ourselves.'

Members of meetings for learning at which accompanying elders were present have spoken of being taken to a different level by their presence. The presence of an accompanying elder often transforms what might be described as a secular presentation or workshop into true ministry. Helen Gould's account of being accompanied by an elder vividly illustrates her ministry in delivering the Backhouse Lecture:

I found that I was able to pray that I would speak all and only what I was given to speak, and that the worshipers/listeners would receive benefit. From that moment I was not actually aware of myself. I'm not sure how to put this at that point I was, I believe, simply a channel for God's love.

(Gould 2009)

At the same time we must be aware that, as this practice is being reclaimed, we do not have very much recent experience to draw on. To accompany a Friend through the process of ministry is stressful and demanding of the elder. It certainly is an enhanced experience for many but, if care is not taken to debrief with the minister and if the elder is not in turn supported, then the result may be spiritually disturbing for the elder. We need to be watchful as we develop this practice.

Nowadays ministry may be defined more broadly than words which are spoken in meeting for worship or in a specially arranged meeting. Ministry can mean organising workshops or leading courses at centres such as Woodbrooke or Pendle Hill, or at yearly meetings or summer gatherings. It may involve speaking truth to power in the corridors of the United Nations, lobbying representatives in government, or enlisting the support of those of other faiths in our witness. All of these activities and many more are forms of ministry, and may therefore be appropriate for an elder's accompaniment. The accompaniment of an elder on a journey of ministry may equally be found in silent worship with a class during a meeting for learning, in holding a business meeting in prayer, or in upholding from afar a Friend taking part in a peace demonstration.

Travelling ministry may have fallen by the wayside for a variety of reasons: the ease of travel, improvements in communication, and a view that our testimony to equality means that we are all endowed with the same gift of ministry; but it has also been described as the glue that used to keep us together. Travelling in the ministry, and travelling under concern, are still valid spiritual practices which are as relevant to us in Britain as in smaller or more far-flung communities. We would do well to revisit them.

### **Accountability Amongst Friends**

Quakers do not often speak today of accountability within our communities. Indeed the very concept of accountability was very distressing to some Friends. It was, however, very much a part of Friends' culture until the twentieth century. Anyone who has seen the film *Friendly Persuasion* will remember the visit by elders to a family, questioning their faithfulness to the testimonies. Members of meetings were expected to be accountable for their faithfulness in the conduct of their daily lives. The practice of elders visiting families to pose queries was both acceptable and expected. Friends visited were required on occasions to respond in writing to the business meeting and, if they continued the behaviour which was deemed unacceptable (such as an intention to marry out or to play musical instruments), they could be 'disowned', their membership terminated, although they were still entitled to attend meeting for worship.

Such accountability would be unacceptable to most Friends today. In our individualistic society such intrusion would be unthinkable. Yet is there still a need for accountability? Sandra Cronk argues that accountability goes to the root of gospel order: 'Historically mutual accountability provided an internal dynamic to keep gospel order strong within the Quaker community' (Cronk 1991 p.21). This is not only a matter of outward behaviour but also of mutual nurture and trust.

If accountability is no longer part of our Quaker practice, is there a new place for it today? If we have a sense of responsibility for each other and for our contribution to the community, is there a place for accountability to ensure that our spiritual lives are authentic? Accountability in many faith traditions relies on a rule or practice to define commitment to living in the Spirit. Examples of such 'rules' include those of the Franciscan order (Ramon 1994), the Iona community (Iona Rule), and the step advocated by Thich Nhat Hanh (Mindfulness bell). These rules are neither creeds nor doctrines but expressions of what a life of faith means in a particular community, a focus on behaviour. Accountability within such a community relies not only on the rule, but also on nurture and support to use the rule to live faithfully.

The application of such a rule to Quakers, with their lack of doctrine, dogma and creed, might seem a contradiction, yet Quakerism has been described as grounded in orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy (Dandelion 1996). Accountability as practiced by early Friends was not only about behaviour, but also about the nurture and support needed to live authentically. However, the practice has until recently fallen away. This may well be because the conventions became meaningless and simply as an end in themselves. Such rules need constant reassessment of their direction and purpose and a continual re-examination in the light of our discipleship, witness and testimonies.

A group of Friends in Britain are today beginning to use their own 'Rules to Live By' following a course run by Alex Wildwood and Ben Pink Dandelion at Woodbrooke in 2006. Through mutual support they identify how they wish to lead faithful lives, and write and share their own 'rules'. Thus they provide for each other a structure for mutual accountability in living authentically. The focus is on practical, even measurable, behaviour and can range from a commitment to daily spiritual practices, or the intention to attend a number of days on retreat each year, to the ways in which they earn and spend their money, their environmental footprint, and their social witness. This is a practice in which elders could support Friends to express their authenticity by using a powerful tool for mutual accountability. Such a practice can only flourish when there is a underpinning of trust, love and caring. With an increasing proportion of attenders within our meetings just such a commitment to accountability may signal a indication that a Friend is ready to move into membership.

Accountability must be central to any community. Certainly when we were asked by Meeting for Sufferings recently to consider climate change in preparation for the Copenhagen summit in December 2009 we were asked to identify what we as individuals and as meeting communities would do to reduce our carbon footprint. This was an invitation and an opportunity to be accountable to each other.

Accountability individually and collectively is part of our commitment to our community and to our spiritual lives. Perhaps this is a concept that elders can help us to reclaim, providing a loving and nurturing opportunity for us all to live more faithfully.

### **Nurturing Spoken Ministry**

The practice of 'eldering' or policing verbal ministry is perhaps the most abused and misunderstood aspect of eldership. We can all think of occasions when the ministry of an individual has been in conflict with gospel order. Whenever this happens, the community has

a responsibility to bring the Friend back to the authentic voice of the spirit. This responsibility is rightly exercised by elders with their spiritual maturity, grounding in the spirit, and knowledge of Friends' ways, and as part of their role in accountability and spiritual nurture. However it is in this aspect of eldership that difficulties sometimes emerge. Friends can be reluctant to challenge those whose verbal ministry appears inappropriate, even if the absence of such discipline is an example of benign neglect. As Ron Selleck has written, 'Both an unspiritual rigor and unspiritual laxity are destructive of life. If many were lost then to rigor, many more are lost today to lukewarmness, indifference and apathy masquerading as tolerance and long suffering' (Selleck 1983). In my interviews I learned of several very positive examples of eldership in response to difficult verbal ministry. In the examples which follow any names have been changed to protect anonymity.

My first example was recounted as follows:

The prominent location of Friends House, the use of its garden by rough-sleepers, and perhaps the kindly reputation of Quakers, tend to attract a steady trickle of troubled people to its Sunday meetings for worship. It came as no surprise, therefore, when a dishevelled elderly man who sometimes pinned military medals to his jacket began attending meeting for worship each week, taking the opportunity of a captive audience to speak at length every Sunday about his wartime experiences. Naturally elders were reluctant to deny the man admission, but their initial approach of explaining to him the Quaker understanding of ministry fell on deaf ears. So they hatched a plan which worked perfectly.

One of the elders volunteered to speak to the man at the conclusion of the next Sunday's meeting for worship, inviting him to return earlier than usual the following Sunday to allow him more time to share his experiences. The man, doubtless gladdened at the prospect of a personal audience, willingly returned the following Sunday to be warmly welcomed by the elder, who took him to a small quiet room where two armchairs and a tray of tea and sandwiches awaited the pair of them. The elder invited the man to share his experiences, freely and without interruption, for as long as he liked, and this encounter lasted for some hours - long after the meeting for worship, in an adjacent room, had concluded. And when the man had told his whole story the elder expressed delight in it, thanking the man for sharing it so trustingly. The elder then explained how and why Quakers speak in meeting for worship, emphasising the importance of silence and reassuring the man that - with his whole story now told - he was heartily welcome to return to meeting for worship every week and to find solace in the silence and in the spoken contributions of others. The man continued to attend meeting each Sunday for several months, and never spoke in meeting again.

An ex clergyman spoke in meeting for the first time when he heard the ministry which in his opinion was wrong in the interpretation of the Bible, and he rose and spoke to put the meeting right. Afterwards a Friend spoke to him lovingly and directly telling him this was not the way of Friends. The elder's approach was so kind that no offence was caused, and it was followed with an invitation to the elder's home.

Another meeting was very disturbed by an elderly Friend, John, who took notes during ministry and then read them aloud to the meeting. For some time the meeting took no action. Eventually Mary stood silently until John stopped speaking and resumed his seat. Speaking to John afterwards, Mary asked lovingly why he made notes and read them aloud. John replied that this was his way of dealing with his failing memory. When Mary told him that his presence in meeting was greatly valued by Friends, he ceased the practice and found peace. It appeared that his behaviour had in part also been an attempt to contribute to and be acknowledged by his own meeting.

On another occasion a Friend reported:

I also remember a meeting [which] I was at when someone with advanced Parkinsons became stuck in a terrible groove and started going round and round in his talk and I remember the sweetness with which a man got up and put his arm round his shoulders and gently led him to his seat.

These examples illustrate discipline offered with love, tenderness, compassion and sensitivity, and are examples of Spirit-led eldership. They show how Friends can be moved to another place, to a new understanding, by the gentle nudges of elders. They were part of a loving and nurturing ministry.

One often hears elders speak of great distress caused by inappropriate ministry, in its timing, its lengths, in the source of inspiration and the motivation of the speaker, in insensitivity or oversensitivity to the perceptions of others. At the same time they feel restrained, trying not to cause offence to the person who ministered. Sometimes in the end they are driven in anger and frustration to challenge the Friend and by doing so do indeed cause great offence. But elders have a responsibility to the spiritual wellbeing of the meeting. Courageous loving and caring enquiry as to where the ministry comes from may provide an opportunity for spiritual growth for all concerned. Risk taking can have surprising results. Elders have a role not only in challenging inappropriate ministry but also in encouraging discussion of what the Spirit has lead Friends to say. It is a healthy spiritual community which talks over coffee about the ministry it has received.

## **Spiritual Nurture**

The elder's spiritual nurturing role has traditionally been seen primarily in terms of the responsibility for meeting for worship and for the worshipping community. Certainly the upholding of meeting for worship by attention to practical arrangements conducive to a gathered meeting is part of this function. Holding the meeting in prayer and supporting those who minister are another part of this role. Yet there is also a less overt role, that of practising true listening to the Spirit, for communal listening to God is at the heart of gospel order.

A worshipping community needs to grow and flourish in the Spirit. By learning together we grow. Elders can identify such needs and facilitate meetings for learning, either by conducting them themselves or by arranging ministry from outside. They can ensure that Friends grow together by sharing meals and witness. The Quaker Quest initiative in Britain has had many benefits, not only by bringing people to Friends but also by facilitating dialogues in meetings about beliefs and spiritual journeys. These have strengthened the spiritual life of meetings, bringing inreach as well as outreach.

Drawing out and encouraging Friends who show gifts for ministry is also a traditional role for elders, yet this nurturing role has wider implications. Nominations committees, certainly in Britain, are often weighed down by the apparent impossibility of finding enough Friends to fill all the vacant posts. In my own area meeting, which has 300 listed members and attenders, there are 100 jobs to be done. If the list is narrowed to Friends and attenders who are active, the difficulty of the nominations committee's task becomes even more apparent. The work of nominations committees is arguably the most important in any meeting, for it brings forward the names of Friends to nurture our spiritual life from which our witness and testimonies spring. Roy Stephenson has done much in Britain in his travelling ministry on the work of

nominations committees (Stephenson 2009). He stresses the importance of prayerful, discernment, of worshipful meetings and of the importance of knowing each other in the things that are both eternal and temporal. Friends taking up service need support, often training and guidance and the work of nominations committees has elements of oversight and eldership. Elders can support the work of nominations committees by prayerfully upholding their work. If they share their insights into the gifts and leadings of individuals with the Friends concerned they can encourage a confidence and willingness to serve, exemplified by these comment from a Friend, 'It was identified in me before I claimed it', 'By sharing with..[a] meeting's nominations committee [the elders] support the committee's discernment'. Other Friends commented 'Nominating, looking for gifts, talking about why they are invited introduces mutual discernment including [that of] the person who is being asked' and 'Naming the person recognising their gifts, bring[s]...us back to the centre [it] reminds us of whose work we are doing'.

In the USA there has been a shift in a few meetings to lay down nominating committees, replacing them with committees for gifts and leadings. This shift in emphasis highlights an important task for elders in nurturing the gifts and leadings of individuals in their meetings.

The emphasis on individual spiritual experience and a reluctance to offend within our meetings has resulted in a reticence to share our spiritual paths. This in turn has meant that within the community individuals have not benefited from learning from each other where we stand at different points on those paths. We have an increasing need for individual spiritual nurture. The practice of having spiritual nurturers for individuals is currently quite prevalent in some faith communities. With its origins in the Catholic Church, this practice was known as spiritual direction and initially was just that – direction, another difficult word for Friends. In some communities however the practice has changed, and among Friends it is more usually known as spiritual nurture. In essence it is the accompaniment on the spiritual path of one Friend by another.

In order to get to know, to accept and to love oneself it is very helpful to have a spiritual companion who is able to listen without passing judgement. The idea of having a spiritual guide is not new to Quakers – any of the early Friends had a ministry of spiritual guidance as had the travelling ministers in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. (Hoare 1995)

There are several ways in which such companionship may work: mentoring in which a more experienced Friend might for instance support and guide someone just taken into membership, or spiritual friendship where two or more Friends perform this service for each other. Spiritual nurture is an important part of eldership; it may take many forms corporately and individually. For some elders this may be extended into training to become a spiritual director. Some Friends find a spiritual nurturer thus trained in spiritual direction, who may or may not be a Friend, to be a vital part of their spiritual life.

The elder-nurturer role is embodied in Douglas Steere's Swarthmore lecture *Where the Words Come From*, published in America as *On Listening to One Another*. He powerfully describes true listening: 'To listen another soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being can perform for another' (Steere 1955).

## Being an Elder

In these four areas of eldership I have perceived the most evident recent developments in the elder's role. Margery Larrabee sees eldership as 'not so much something we do as something we are' (Larrabee 2007 p.33). Yet even when we are grounded in the spirit, the role can be very demanding. What is it like to be an elder? How can we make sure that we are up to the job?

When we talk about our spiritual lives we struggle to find the words to describe our experience. We often resort to metaphor. Sometimes we fall silent, conscious that the very act of finding words actually alters our perception of the experience. The work of elders is within this realm, difficult to express. How do we perceive the difference that an elder may make to silent worship? How do we know the difference between ministry upheld by an elder? The answer is that we do know. It may be difficult to put into words but we perceive it, just as we know the quality of a gathered meeting. However inadequate language may be, we need to struggle to continue to express our experience. It is only through doing this that we can capture, however inadequately, the central role of eldership in the Society.

The contexts in which we are elders are diverse and complex. Donald Schon, writing about educating professional practitioners, talks of educational practice as coming from the 'technical rational high-ground'. This exploration of the four areas of eldership might well be criticised for coming from a spiritual high-ground. Schon talks about the reality of professional practice as being in the 'swampy lowlands'; a place in which situations are complex, emotional and human. He argues for an educational process which prepares those professionals to develop their ability to work instinctively and reflectively. The reality of our worshipping communities may be far more recognisable as the swampy lowlands of Quakerism.

While the role of elder can be recognised by Quakers across the world it is within the swampy lowlands that the differences between our Quaker traditions and differences between our cultures are reflected. It is here that we live and here that our greatest challenges are revealed. In Britain at present we have triennial appointments, with most elders serving no more than six years. While this ensures that no Friend remains in a position of leadership for too long it also means that in our dwindling communities it may be difficult to find Friends with appropriate gifts. It does, however, give opportunity for those who may not obviously demonstrate their suitability to be given opportunity and support to grow into the role. It is often said 'once an elder always an elder', many of the gifts that elders possess do not cease at the end of their formal service and they continue to provide spiritual grounding in our meetings. Looking around any meeting it is easy to identify those Friends with whom one would choose to discuss the things that trouble us on our spiritual path, those whose presence radiates a deep, still spirituality. Another issue which seems to challenge the strengthening of the role of elders in Britain is the tendency to appoint Friends to ministry and oversight or to provide the same support through a different structure. (Religious Society of Friends 2008). Both of these challenges may reflect a way of ensuring that we do not settle too heavily into particular roles within a meeting, but with a constant renewal of this function by appointment of newcomers to the task, is it possible for elders to

seek a deeper life in the spirit, to gain practical skills of eldership and to support each other? If it is not possible to manage this within our current framework are we prepared to re-examine how we do this?

So what are the spiritual equivalents of working instinctively and reflectively? At a recent workshop of experienced elders they said the following about their eldership:

- we need a willingness to step into something hard
- we help to create moments when there is an opening space
- eldering is a spiritual practice, sometimes we are simply an anchor in a strong sea
- eldering is sinking deep in times of trouble
- we are walking into the unknown

They also remind us that we do not have a responsibility to fix things but to provide the depth of being that will enable the spirit to do the work:

- we hold something that we don't understand
- It is difficult to trust that the next step is there even if not seen
- our spiritual experience gives us the foundation for what we are doing
- it is the difference between knowing with the heart and knowing with the head
- we are called to be servants
- we need roots in God's presence
- we are living into God's vision

Edward Hoare reminds us, 'Those who are called to the office of elder need to help to prepare for the tasks which lie ahead. Perhaps the first task of the elder is to nurture each other for how otherwise can they give to the meeting?'(Hoare 1995). My interviewees talked about the importance of being prepared in mind, body and spirit. We need to do our homework:

- We need to get rest and play as well as undertake the work that is required of us. It is our responsibility to ensure that we are as physically fit as possible to undertake our calling;
- We need to do our intellectual homework, ensuring that we are well versed in the history and theology of the Quaker way and familiar with initiatives which require our witness in the world;
- We need to ensure that we are psychologically prepared, and that we have done the work necessary to ensure that we do not bring our own distress to our interactions with others, so that we understand our own emotional landscape sufficiently to know what is ours and what belongs to another; and

- We need above all to be spiritually nourished. Being an elder is in itself a rich experience, and the sharing by others of their own intimate journeys is a privilege and a joy. The feedback that we receive from our communities is another rich source of support. We spend time listening and upholding the spirit within our worship, and this too nourishes us. However, elders also need eldership, spiritual nurture. This can be provided through a peer group process. In listening to each other we need to pay attention to the movement of the spirit within ourselves and beyond. This is our primary need if we are to do our job effectively, and we are irresponsible if we do not to care for ourselves in this way.

## **Conclusion**

My exploration of the role of eldership has been a rich and enlightening journey. Eldership is in itself a form of ministry. I have witnessed a recognition of the elder's role which is rooted in the beginnings of the Religious Society of Friends and which transcends our organisational frameworks. I also detect a yearning in our worshipping communities for a strengthening of the role and function of elders. In four areas of eldership practice new shoots are appearing. Ministry continues within the society, taking many forms, and although ministers may be identified in different ways they share a need for the rooted support of strong elders. Accountability was once an important part of our community life, and we need to recapture those yearnings for personal accountability and to find new ways of achieving them. We need to be courageous in speaking truth to each other in the spirit and in love, for otherwise there is a danger that benign neglect will impede the flowering of our witness. We need to ensure that our meeting communities are places in which the spirit can flourish among us, and in which we learn to know and support each other in the things that are eternal. These are rightly the realms of eldership.

The Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain faces a considerable challenge, one which in some part mirrors the decline in numbers experienced by Friends in Britain in the mid nineteenth century. Radical action then resulted in growth and transition into liberal Quakerism. The challenges that we face today are different. We are afraid to speak about our faith in case we offend those whose faith is based differently. We started life as a covenanted community with a faith expressed through Christian language because we knew no other. We are becoming increasingly pluralist; we have embraced theists and non-theists and those from other faith traditions. We may be in danger of becoming diluted into a meaningless 'secular spirituality'. However, when we do share our spiritual journeys with each other, when we dare to speak about how we define God, the Spirit, the Inner Light, the divine, the Great Mystery, our divisions fade away. Our fundamental deep connectedness in community, with individual and corporate worship and rootedness in our direct experience of God is still relevant. We can share our deepest experience, acknowledge and value our differences and recognise what we share is infinitely more important than the language in which we might wrap it. Then everything becomes possible. We can go to the heart of our community and strengthen it in the Spirit. We can be explicit about what it means to be a Quaker, about what the Society of Friends is, and about what is important to us. We have the opportunity to be radical: radical in going to the heart of our faith and speaking it plainly.

We need to come from a position of strength to reclaim the power of our worshipping community, to keep it grounded in God's guidance and interpret it for today's challenges.

This is our witness in the world. We do indeed stand at a crossroads. We must find a confident voice to express clearly our life in the Spirit. Our membership is no longer dominated by birthright Friends. Our culture and practice are no longer passed down through our genes or within family traditions. Our numbers are now dominated instead by convinced Friends. We need to re-examine our language, rejecting what is elitist and obscure but cherishing those words and phrases which have a deep and unique meaning.

To revitalise the Society of Friends in Britain, we need to attract more people who are seeking the depth and richness of a life lived in the Spirit that is uniquely Quaker. We must therefore nurture and strengthen the heart of our faith. Eldership can do this for us. If we revitalise eldership we revitalise the Society. Strong eldership is the root of our life in the Spirit and in the world. We should not be afraid of its rigour. We need to name our elders, and to name what they do. We need to find ways of nurturing and strengthening our elders' roles in our meetings. Only by doing this can we strengthen our ministry, return to discipline and accountability, and nurture our meetings and the individuals within them. There is a hunger bubbling up, a sense of excitement and a willingness to be radical. We can seize the moment in the words of George Fox to:

*'be patterns, be examples to all places islands, nations wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them: then you will walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone.'*

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