

On Being a Recorded Minister

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Introduction

Anne Buttenheim’s blurb for this talk makes it sound as though I am going to try to sell you on the institution of recorded ministers. This is not true. It is not a particularly attractive position to occupy, because it sits so uneasily with our present theologies. Further, recorded ministers have done considerable damage during the last couple of centuries, and there is a lot to say against the institution. Finally, it may be that Friends, at least in the unprogrammed, Friends General Conference tradition, cannot make such an institution work, and it is misguided to try.

I would like to claim the following, though:

First, that the institution is often misinterpreted, and this makes it harder to understand its possible relevance for today;

Second, the institution served several purposes, which Friends still need to accomplish. In this respect, therefore, it poses a challenge to Friends to find alternative structures if this one is no longer serviceable.

Third, I believe that this challenge is related to central questions of theology and practice among us about which it would be well to work towards a consensus.

In the course of the revision of our New England Yearly Meeting discipline a decade ago, and in other contexts, I have sat in on several weighty considerations of this topic over the years, and although they have been good discussions, there has not been a lot of progress. This is a sign to me that we are not yet asking the right questions. It seems to me that the right questions have to do with the way our community recognizes (in the sense of “comes to see”) the gifts being poured out upon us, and takes an appropriate, active role in their cultivation, without which the gifts will not bear fruit as they should.

All discussion about “machinery,” or more politely “church polity,” has to take second place to a focus on this central question. We are in a weakened condition, as a people, in part because of our lack of attention to the nurture of gifts. It only helps to talk about recording ministry if it furthers our understanding of the tasks lying before us. How can we grow again into a witnessing, prophetic community? There are words we are not saying, deeds we are not doing, questions we are not asking, and I suspect that some of our weakness is related to the way we care for the gifts bestowed on our community.

I would like to address the basics of the history and procedures of recording, then a bit about my own experience of it. Finally, I will try to address its relevance to the larger question of nurturing gifts in the present day.

I should say that I will not speak about Friends’ pastors here. The recording of ministers is a much older practice, by more than a century, than the calling of pastors by Friends meetings, and it is quite possible to discuss recording without reference to pastors at all – they are not the same thing! I also will not address anything about the variations in the practice of recording from one yearly meeting to another, though that might be interesting as well.

Finally, please note that in most discussions about ministry, we end up focusing on vocal ministry, the ministry of the Word. In part, this is because the gospel ministers, whose gift was the gift of articulation, felt it part of their duty to record their experiences under the weight of their gift. This means that, from some periods of Quaker history, we have a lot of information about the growth, nurture, and pitfalls of gifts in vocal ministry (in all their great variety, as we will come back to later). It does point up the central role that the ministry of the Word has held among us during the entire lifetime of the Quaker movement. On the other hand, other Friends, with other undoubted gifts, have not left us any such record of their life-cycle in ministry. Since Friends have not yet redressed this balance, we often find ourselves referring to the great body of history about vocal ministers, as a point from which to draw speculations or analogies about other kinds of ministers. I wish we could find a way to get around this artifact of our history!

From the earliest days of the Quaker movement, Friends have assumed that, while anyone may be called to ministry, some seem to be called, appropriately and faithfully, to more responsibility or concern for the work than others. The assumption is that Christ is the head of the church, and pouring out the gifts that the community needs. These gifts (tasks, responsibilities, abilities) come for longer or shorter periods of time, and vary in many other characteristics as well. Robert Barclay’s articulation of this in his *Apology* is retained in some books of *Faith and Practice*:

We do believe and affirm that some are more particularly called to do the work of the ministry, and therefore are fitted by the Lord for that purpose; whose work is more constantly and particularly to instruct, exhort, admonish, oversee, and watch over their brethren; and that...there is something more incumbent upon them in that respect than upon every common believer. (*Apology*, prop 10 §10)

In the early days of the movement, Friends who felt the call to ministry were in touch with each other on a local, regional, and national level, by frequent meetings and in correspondence. They felt strongly their fellowship, their special kinship, as a result of their shared calling, though in each life the calling looked different.

By the 1670s, there was a regular meeting in London of all public Friends who happened to be in town. They met for mutual support, and to work out who would go to which meetings in the coming week, so that “ministers should not go about in heaps.” There was also discussion of places that might need special attention or support. Since this meeting was held on Second-Day, it was always called the Second-Day Morning Meeting (or Morning Meeting, for short), and it continued until the early part of this century. (After Fox’s death, it also served as a way-station for Friends’ correspondence, and as the censor of Friends’ publications in London Yearly Meeting, though it had no official status as part of the Yearly Meeting – it was not the same as the Yearly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, for example.)

The way you were accepted as a member of the Second Day Morning Meeting was to sign in a big book on Second Day morning, as you came to attend. It happened in 1734 that a Friend (I forget his name right now) signed in, who (other Friends thought) was not in unity with Friends, and his right to attend the meeting was challenged. After lengthy wrangling, London Yearly Meeting ruled that the Second Day Morning Meeting could not exclude anyone who came with a letter from their monthly meeting attesting to the fact that this Friend was a minister (= public Friend) in good standing there.

From these haphazard beginnings, there developed predictably the following procedure, varying only slightly from place to place in Quakerdom for two centuries. In our New England Yearly Meeting, this old procedure is intact, if rarely used. It goes like this, with variations from one yearly meeting to another: If a Friend gives evidence of a “sustained gift in the Gospel ministry,” then the local meeting on ministry and counsel brings it to the monthly meeting. If the meeting unites in this perception of the Friend, the matter is referred to the quarterly meeting on ministry and counsel, who appoints a committee to meet with the Friend in question, and the monthly meeting as well, if necessary. If the committee agrees with the monthly meeting, it makes a recommendation to quarterly meeting’s ministry and counsel, which if it concurs then passes the matter with a recommendation to the full quarterly meeting. If the quarterly meeting approves, it then informs the monthly meeting, and there is an end to it. In the old days, the only event that would mark the final approval (beyond the minute itself) is that the Friend would for the first time take his or her place in the facing benches at meeting.

The recorded Friend would also become a member of the system of parallel meetings of ministers and elders, at the levels of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings. There was not a closed membership to the meeting of ministers and elders. There might well be more than one minister in a meeting (better if there was), or none.

After recording, then what?

As the quote from Barclay suggests, Friends have always held that some Friends would have extra responsibility for preaching and teaching. How this was to manifest itself would depend on the Friend’s gift, and could not be legislated. Some valued ministers spoke rarely in meeting, but were good at home visitation, or at holding meetings among non-Friends, or at some other kind of public religious work. Some Friends whom we remember as great travelers really were – Elias Hicks covered perhaps 40,000 miles in his long life; he and others such as Rebecca Jones or Stanley Pumphrey might have visited all the meetings of Friends then existing. On the other hand, the majority of Woolman’s travel minutes were for service within his monthly or quarterly meeting, or yearly meeting at the furthest extent, and some of these were at the instigation of the concerned meeting. If you total all of John Woolman’s travels, his lifetime time on the road might be less than three years. Based on a reading of successive issues of the *Annual Monitor* and similar compilations of memorials of deceased worthies, many ministers never got minutes for travel at all.

“All” that was required of ministers was that they devote time to prayer and Scriptural study, shaping their life to service, and then to do anything they were called by God to do, and nothing else (in religious work), subject to the discernment of the meeting, especially the elders of the meeting. They were to seek the society and counsel of more experienced ministers, though never to emulate them. They also were to be faithful in attendance at meetings for worship and business, and at meetings of ministry and counsel (monthly, quarterly, and yearly). In New England

Yearly Meeting, ministers are not *ex officio* on the local meeting on ministry and counsel, but are members of the yearly meeting committee on ministry and counsel.

(In many meetings, the only vocal ministry came from recorded ministers, resident or visiting, and this was one reason why Friends have wanted the institution abolished – to remove the sense of elitism, and open up the ministry to all, as in the old days. Even in the old days, though, at the most anarchic stages of the movement, Friends recognized that some were rightly “in the ministry,” and were effective in supporting them. London (now Britain) Yearly Meeting did away with the practice in 1924, though a retrospective by Harvey in the ‘40s suggested that the Yearly Meeting had not succeeded in its plan to care for the ministry by more “democratic” means.)

Friends ministers were never paid for their work, though if they could not bear the cost of something the meeting had agreed they were called to do, the meeting was obliged to help, either with travel expenses or help at home while the minister was away.

How has it looked for me, as one of the current crop of recorded ministers?

I was recorded by Salem Quarterly Meeting at the request of Lynn Monthly Meeting, in October 1983. I was serving as Director of the Friends Home at the time, and trying to revive the monthly meeting in Lynn, formerly a programmed meeting, but at that time meeting in silence (mostly). The meeting was dying; in fact it was laid down three years later, alas, after more than 300 years. I was 30 years old at the time of recording. The whole process was something of interest, not to say curiosity, since it had been some many years since Salem Quarterly Meeting had recorded a minister, though many had transferred their membership into the Quarterly Meeting from elsewhere.

In addition, there were a couple of meetings within the quarter that had minuted their opposition to the practice of recording. They felt it was outmoded, and perhaps not in keeping with Friends’ principles, and no longer needed. During the 1950s, Henry Cadbury had provided some background discussion for Friends Meeting at Cambridge, as they considered the question, perhaps in the context of the revision of the discipline. He focused primarily on the question of recording as a way of fostering leadership within the meeting, and his own sense was that the meeting’s present practices sufficed.

A further political complication is New England’s status as a once-divided, now united yearly meeting, though the traces of the division, you might say the seams, are still visible, and only slowly being eradicated by the passage of time. This means that there are several pastoral meetings, and many Friends of unprogrammed meetings associate the practice of recording of ministers with the having of pastors. It is therefore a Suspect, if not a Bad, Thing.

In my yearly meeting, of the approximately thirty recorded ministers, the majority were given that status in conjunction with some pastoral service, either within New England or elsewhere.

I had some interesting conversations with some people, who had a problem with the recording process, and with my being recorded. There was certainly an implication on the part of some that I was trying to make something happen, creating an authoritative status for myself, or committing some other sin of pride. A couple of elder Friends chided me, having made it clear that they didn’t think that anyone “deserved” the status, since, for example, some ministers from the past had transgressed Friends principles unchastised, and many another Friend passed important, sanctified lives of service within and outside the Society and never had such a label.

Some who did not speak to me in that vein wondered, though, if I were casting in my lot with the pastoral wing, and this took place during a time when Christian language was emerging from the shadows in many meetings, and sometimes causing division; and on the other hand some of the pastoral meetings in the yearly meeting were asserting some of their own needs and concerns, as opposed to those of the unprogrammed majority. It was an exciting time in New England, which is generally an exciting yearly meeting anyway. To be proposed as a recorded minister was to draw, in a humble measure, a lot of different kinds of lightning.

Usually, when people are asked what value ministers can have, the answers point to things like getting access to places (like prisons or hospitals), ecclesiastical endorsement of pastoral counselors, having people who can speak or act officially (for example, perform weddings), and representation at things like clergy associations. I find these personally uninteresting, and not at all in line with Friends’ tradition, though others have found them very important to their work – Fay Honey Knopp’s work in prisons being a good example.

But what has it meant to me, having lived with it for thirteen years?

The first effect was one of encouragement. Friends took the opportunity to tell me that they thought my service had been of value, and would continue to be. Recorded ministers and others who had exercised leadership in the yearly meeting spoke of their own experience, encouraged me to contact them, and teased me.

It provided me a pretext on which to make contact with other ministers, both officially endorsed and otherwise, in other yearly meetings that I passed through.

It allowed callings to come through the invitations of Friends and meetings. That is, I have been asked fairly often to be part of forums or adult education, or to join meetings to consider some point of Friends' doctrine or practice, or otherwise help out. Not all of these invitations have been right for me to accept, but each of them, whether undertaken or not, has been a real opportunity for spiritual growth and exercise. Another word for minister is servant, and sometimes a call from God's people is a call from God. I am happy to report that confirmation of this has often come indirectly, when I have declined an invitation, but suggested someone else instead, and for those Friends it has been an opening to new kinds of service.

It made me consider carefully what my gifts or calling might really be. Was it what was complimented, when Friends talked to me about the recording, or about this or that workshop or meeting visit? I began to explore this in more depth for myself, to apply a new level of skepticism about my assumptions about myself. I became quieter.

It made me uncomfortable, because it is clear that there were many around me who in other times would have been recorded, but who were carrying on with their concerns without any such label, as I had done before. One minister, well known in these parts also, told me that although he accepted the status at the insistence of his meeting, he had come to resolve that he would not let it change anything he did.

At about this time there were discussions within our yearly meeting about the whole practice of recording, and a survey was done of the New England ministers, asking them how they'd been recorded, what difference had it made, and how this related to their life as members of their meetings now. This forced me, new to the guild, to figure out what added value it might bring to have someone so labeled. It seemed clear from many of the answers that were given that the recording had conferred no value on most of the ministers, except when it was for some specific service (a pastorate, or prison access, for example).

My conclusions now run something like this:

The assertion that "we are all ministers" is, while potentially true, too trivial to carry much weight in the discussion about whether the spiritual body has any specialized organs at all, or is all a uniform mass, apparently democratic.

Further, a discussion of these questions is usually framed too narrowly.

What I want to say is a little more concrete. I believe that the unprogrammed tradition of the Society of Friends is in a period of great weakness. We are hesitant about declaring our faith, hesitant about our allegiance to our spiritual community, contentious about verbal formulations, limited in our demographics. We have poor skills for spiritual nurture, a weak ability to overcome internal conflict, and limited resources for continued spiritual growth beyond the first stages; our education and spiritual nurture is geared to inquirers, and undeveloped for children or long-time Friends.

Now, in the past, the Society had a system within which these tasks were undertaken. I do not say the system was perfect, but it was there, and Friends accepted that it should exist, and also that it should change as needed (though carefully). Many of the issues confronting Friends today have to do with spiritual authority, leadership, and the care of communities. The ministry – what kinds there are, how it should be supported, how it affects the community – is a central meeting place of all these issues. In working out answers to these questions, we also have to confront the whole question, central to Friends' experience, of the relationship between the individual and the community. How does the community exercise discernment? What influence should it exert on the members' lives? What do members owe the meeting?

The system includes the meetings for business, the meetings for worship, the meetings of ministers and elders, the weekly, monthly, and annual rhythms of our group life, and their mirrored images in our homes and in our selves.

The institution of the recorded ministry rested on several important assertions: that the community has a spiritual life that needs cultivation; that the cultivation needs specific attention, in parallel with care of the members individually; that God calls people to specific service, in varying degrees and for varying lengths of time, and in various kinds. How do we recognize, support, and shape concerns in a meeting? It must in the end focus on the Friend under concern. You cannot for long support "the ministry" without supporting the ministers, the carriers of the concern. Therefore, a recorded minister in these days in some sense incarnates the need to consider these questions as part of the life of the meeting, and the Society at large. People are reluctant to get down to naming and working with particular people, so a recognized minister is an easy mark, since he or she has already been singled out, and thus can serve (in these experimental times) as a guinea-pig for these explorations in applied spirituality.

The guinea-pig role is an important one, in my experience. I have sometimes felt that my service among Friends might be characterized by the recognition of a need, followed by a sense that others were not quite ready to take the first step, followed by my trying to do it, doing it badly, but opening the way for others to really get it right. Gene

McCarthy used to joke about how his high school football team was so bad that their best play was the forward fumble, and that sounds about like what happens to me.

More generally, the institution of recorded ministers has in the past supported collegiality among Friends experienced in following a certain kind of call over long periods of time, and has provided a kind of apprenticeship for Friends entering onto such a long-term calling. This is certainly not provided for by our current practice, either by clearness committees or by the meetings on ministry and counsel. This lack of cultivation over time means that our ministry tends to stay within rather narrow bounds, and we see little growth in the gifts, little grounded experimentation within the ministry of any one person.

The meeting always is most healthy when there is a variety of ministries being exercised, and some of the forms of ministry, including vocal ministry, or (better) gospel ministry, take time to “master.” That is, after some time of following a call to visitation of the sick, or of visiting in families, you get better at it, if you are reflective about it, and have colleagues to consult with about how it went. Many ministries that require this kind of ripening are rarely or ever exercised now, because we don’t feel capable.

This has more than antiquarian interest. I am not interested in reviving called “meetings for apprentices” and the like just because once we had them. An important feature of our spiritual landscape in the past was the belief that worship might break out at any time, in any context, for any group. A Friend whose primary aim was preparedness to notice such occasions could hold consciousness of the possibilities of making holy a moment or a group, by injecting a sense of Presence and reverence into it, and this means that the group can be creative, has more tools for exploring how to hallow yet another aspect of life.

A critical outgrowth of this sense of identification with others who shared the work was that part of a minister’s call was always and everywhere to be sensitive to “the springs of life breaking forth in any” (to quote Fox). Ministers were to call out the gifts of others, and lovingly encourage them in faithfulness.

Finally, I think that recognized ministers are part of a pact with their meetings, and should be willing both to submit their leadings to the meeting’s discernment, and to listen when Friends suggest ways of service that might be appropriate to consider. All ministry should come with a sense of fresh requirement by God, but one can never tell how a call might come. A call from the meeting may well be in right ordering. Such a relationship is to the meeting’s benefit as well.

New England Yearly Meeting has often discussed how to encourage appropriate oversight of ministers, and has asked meetings to consider this, but I am not aware of any progress. Some Friends (in other yearly meetings) have a committee that oversees them, though I think ministry and counsel (and other elders) should be the location for such contacts and nurture. I do think that the minister might have the responsibility for reporting to ministry and counsel on some regular basis. (I reported regularly at Lynn Meeting; most meetings don’t do this, and Cambridge Meeting never was interested in that.)

About a year ago, some Friends from my own meeting approached me, and proposed to convene a committee that would serve as a “support committee” for me. We have shaped it a bit, so that it is intended for the benefit of the members as well, but since we meet only about once every six months, I cannot report any trends yet. When I was recorded, two Friends volunteered to act as “elders” for me, and we met a couple of times, but then distance and other logistics cut that short. The most important thing about this is that it supports a meeting’s exploration of its sensitivity to and support of the gifts of its membership, and finds ways to do the delicate, detailed work with individuals that this requires in the end.

A flip side of that is that the person who feels a calling must see it as his or her right and duty to seek to ground it within their community, for confirmation, guidance, stimulation, and discipline. The community should include the monthly meeting, even if it includes those outside as integral parts.

To summarize:

I do not claim that the old machinery is what we need, but that the old machinery was [1] consistent with our theology, and [2] addressed real needs, which are not now being met. Since few of us have grown up in a setting where the old traditions lived on in some measure, the old ways cannot mean the same to us now, but they can be instructive and challenging. This includes the ways in which the traditional practices were not adequate to their tasks, of course – no social system is perfect!

Our challenge as a society is to face the real needs of our community. What will release and make the best use of our gifts and opportunities? The discussion of recording must continue among us in such a way that we do not just reach some conclusions about an old custom, but take creative steps that build on both our current understanding, and on three centuries of Quaker practice – practice in a very specific spiritual path with its own boundaries and its own kinds of truth. In the end, gospel order is discovered, not “created” by us.

Another way to put this is: one way to describe the “meaning” of a group, like our Society of Friends, is that it should be seeking to fully embody the vision given it. I believe that we perhaps have focused too much on belief, and too little on practices of faithfulness. Always in the past, when Friends had looked so uniform, do you think they all *thought* the same? The glimpses we have of private thoughts and beliefs suggest that within the orthodox demeanor there were often quite heterodox thoughts and meanings. This is OK with me, as I think about it now. It seems to me a more fruitful approach to combating the swift erosion of our Society’s meaning is to consider whether we can agree, meeting by meeting, on how a Friend should look and act, rather than how he or she should believe. Practices are not merely external, are not merely “form,” but can provide a vessel into which meaning is poured and transformed, and by which meaning is taught and reflected upon.

A body of Friends, once labeled the ministry, whose goal is to maintain watchfulness, and to sometimes articulate (in the right times and the right places) what they see, in warning, instruction, or encouragement, may well serve powerfully in this more practical search for unity, seeing and seeking the lawfulness that is at the heart of gospel freedom.