Spiritual Formation Queries

Format. You can use these queries in at least two ways. First, as prompts for personal consideration, for example, as journaling exercises. But they can also be used for collective consideration, as meeting or conference exercises, especially in small groups.

General queries on the life of the Spirit

Faith

- What are the beliefs and ideas, the hopes and expectations, that shape our spiritual lives?

Practice

- How do we try to realize the spiritual fulfillment that we seek?

Experience

- How have our experiences shape our spiritual lives?
- How have our faith and practice, our Quaker tradition and our meeting life, given rise to new spiritual and religious experiences?

Community and its traditions

- What is the role of our meetings in our spiritual lives?
- How does the Quaker way more broadly understood provide a support system for our spiritual lives?

Relationships

- How do we support each other in our spiritual lives?
- Maybe most importantly, if we have such a relationship, what is our relationship with God, or with Jesus, or with whatever other spiritual presences are important to our spiritual lives?

Exploring experience

Formative experience. Think of an important or even formative spiritual experience you've had.

- What does it mean to you? How it has shaped your spiritual life? How has it shaped your life as a Friend
- What makes your experience "spiritual"?
- Did this experience take place in a Quaker context, or before you became a Friend, or outside of your life in the Quaker way?
- How does it help to shape your Quaker faith and practice?

Spiritual or religious? Imagine a room in which one wall represents identifying yourself as "spiritual" and the opposite wall represents identifying yourself as "religious". Now place yourself in that room, along that spectrum. For exercise purposes, let's say "spiritual" is 1 and "religious" is 10.

- Where did you end up on the spectrum?
- What do you mean by "spiritual" and "religious" as a possible self-identifications?
- Why do you think of yourself as a religious person—or why do you not?
- Given that you've joined the *Religious* Society of Friends, and given your answers so far, what does being a member of this religion mean to you?
- Are you more comfortable with "God" or with "the Spirit"? Why?
- What role, if any, does Jesus play in your religious life?
- How do you relate to the Bible?

Temperament

To some degree, how we identify as spiritual and/or religious is a matter of temperament, by which I mean the kinds of things that have consistently drawn our attention throughout our life. Friend Karen Tibbals has worked with two surveys that London Yearly Meeting did of its new members asking in part what drew them to Quakerism, where did they come from to get here? Those surveys and her analysis identified three of what I will call "temperaments," three kinds of folks who find their way to Quakers. The survey called them mystics, activists, and refugees. Karen and I agree that it would be more descriptive to categorize these "refugees" as people seeking community; some of them are refugees from a prior community with which they've had a bad experience, but others have not been traumatized and just seek a religious home.

The "mystics" are people who are focused on the spirit-center within us, people whose temperament leans toward the mystical, people for whom the Inner Light and the gathered meeting answer their search for transcendence, meaning, and fulfillment.

The "activists" are those who want to change the world and heal its hurts, whose temperament reflects the heart of the activist, for whom our testimonies and the testimonial life answer their search for spiritual grounding in their efforts toward peace, justice, and sustainability.

The Quaker way also speaks to those who seek a new kind of community, one that replaces control and hierarchy with true and equal fellowship, to folks whose temperament leans toward the social, for whom the collective and the way of love answer their yearning for a sense of religious homecoming.

- Do you share one or more of these temperaments?
- Are the yearnings that drew you to Friends being satisfied?
- If not, what can you do about it?
- If they are, then how can you pass your satisfaction forward to attenders and new members?

Quaker spirituality

- **Spiritual gifts :** What do you think are your spiritual gifts?
- **Openings** (insights into Truth inspired by the Holy Spirit) : Think about a message you brought to meeting for worship or some opening you had in worship or while meditating or reading, or whatever—capture that thrilling feeling and store it in your soul for future inspiration.
- **Leadings** (divine promptings to serve the Spirit in some specific way) :
  - Have you ever felt a leading? Were you able to pursue it?
  - How did you discern whether it was from the Spirit? Did you have a clearness committee? Would you have wanted one?
  - Did you need or want support for it, from you meeting or from someone?
- **Ministry** (a broader or more sustained call to divine service) :
  - Have you ever felt called to a ministry? Were you able to pursue it?
  - How did you discern whether it was from the Spirit? Did you have a clearness committee? Would you have wanted one?
  - Did you need or want support for it, from your meeting or from someone?
- **Callings** (a sense of calling that reorients more of your life than the pursuit of just one ministry does) : What do you think you are here on this earth for?

Personal devotional life

- **Practice :** What is your spiritual practice outside of meeting for worship?
- **Centering :** What meditation or deepening techniques do your use to center down in your personal devotional life, or in meeting for worship?
- **Prayer :** Do you pray? If so, how do you pray? If not, why not?
- **Study :** Do you study religion, spirituality, Quakerism, the Bible, yoga, or some other spiritual disciplines?

Meeting for worship

- **Practice :** What is your spiritual practice in meeting for worship? What do you think about, put your attention on?
- **Vocal ministry:**
  - How often do you speak?
  - How do you discern whether to speak?
  - Do people sometimes thank you for your messages after rise of meeting? Put another way, do you think you might have a gift for vocal ministry?
  - Have you ever been "eldered" regarding your ministry? Do you think it was justified? Was it a learning experience, or just painful?
  - Do you experience your vocal ministry as episodic, as arising in just that moment each time, or do you feel your messages arise from some continuing underlying stream of prophetic inspiration; that is, do you think you might have a calling to vocal ministry?
  - What do you think—and how do you *feel*—about the idea of a calling to vocal ministry, which was the tradition of Friends for centuries?
  - Would you welcome attention and support for your ministry from your worship and ministry committee? Or from some "elder", some mentor?

The meeting's role in spiritual formation

Religious education.

Your meeting.

- Does your meeting have regular adult RE programs on spirituality, Quaker ministry and vocal ministry, deepening techniques, and/or Quaker worship, or the Quaker way more generally?
- Does your meeting sponsor study groups, worship sharing or other opportunities for sharing, or discussion groups on vocal ministry?
- Does your meeting have a library?
- Does it offer help to members and attenders for attending retreats and courses outside the meeting?
- How are our traditions passed along in your meeting?

You.

- Do you study spirituality, religion, Quakerism, or the Bible yourself?
- How do you teach yourself the Quaker way?
- Do you have the gift of teaching? How could you contribute to RE in your meeting?

Worship and vocal ministry.

Your meeting.

- Does your worship and ministry committee pay proactive attention to members or attenders who begin to speak more often in meeting, or who speak with unusual depth?
- Do you approach them in order to see whether they feel a calling to vocal ministry in the way that they might feel called to some witness ministry?
- Or do you at least try to find out whether they would like to explore what their ministry means to them informally somehow?
- Is your committee ready to provide guidance and support to an emerging vocal minister?
- Is your worship and ministry committee ready to deal with problems in the worship and does it have the meeting's agreement about who should do this, and when, and how?

You.

- How often do you speak in meeting for worship?
- Do you feel called to spoken ministry in any way that is deeper and more sustained than occasional messages prompted in the moment?
- How do you feel about the idea of a vocal ministry calling?
- Would you be willing to approach emerging ministers in your meeting, just inviting them to talk about how it's going, what it means to them, and whether they want any support?
- Could you bring such a practice to your worship and ministry committee?

Spiritual formation and nurture.

Your meeting.

- Does your meeting offer programs aimed at spiritual nurture or opportunities for members and attenders to explore their spiritual lives together?
- Do you bring up spiritual formation in any way in your clearness committees for membership, exploring with applicants for membership what their spiritual interests and temperament are and how you might serve those interests?
- Does your meeting focus proactively on nurturing attenders, exploring with them what their spiritual interests are and how you might serve those interests, and how you might introduce them further to the Quaker way?

You.

- What kinds of spiritual nurture do feel you need?
- What kinds of spiritual nurture do you want from your meeting?
- If you don't expect to be able to get it from your meeting, what can you do about that?
- How might you foster spiritual growth in your meeting as a mentor of others, especially of newcomers and attenders?

Spiritual gifts.

Your meeting.

- Does your meeting do more to identify and nurture the spiritual gifts of its members and attenders, beyond the role of nominating committee in filling committee appointments?
- Does your meeting write memorial minutes, which could serve as a model for recognizing gifts before a gifted Friend dies?
- Would your worship and ministry committee consider thinking about the spiritual gifts of the people in your meeting, maybe even keeping an informal journal for it, so that at least you are attending to this possible eldership role as a committee?

You.

- Assuming that your worship and ministry committee doesn't already make some effort to attend to your members' gifts, would you consider bringing this kind of thing to the committee?
- Or, if you don't serve on the committee or you don't think the committee would not want to do that, would you consider thinking about the gifts of your meeting's members and attenders yourself?

Support for leadings and ministry.

Your meeting.

- Do the people in your meeting think of their service to the meeting and in the world as Spirit-inspired ministry?
- If they felt a leading, would they recognize it as such, and if they did, would they know where to go in the meeting with their concern?
- Would your meeting know how to respond? Specifically, does your meeting know how to conduct clearness committees for personal decision making and for discernment of leadings, how they are constituted and conducted?
- Does your meeting write minutes for travel and service, or take someone's leading or ministry under its care in some meaningful way?
- Does your meeting know how to form and support spiritual support committees for Friends whose ministry could come under the meeting's care?

You.

- What kinds of spiritual support do you need for the ministries you recorded for yourself in the earlier journaling exercise?
- If you're not sure what your ministries are, then what issues in your environment or in the world do you feel a deep concern about, but aren't sure what to do about it? These might point to possible ministries.
- Would you want help with becoming more clear about whether these concerns you feel might become a ministry through a clearness committee for yourself?

The culture of eldership.

Your meeting.

- How does your meeting offer spiritual nurture to its members and attenders?
- In what areas does your meeting have room to expand or improve its efforts at spiritual nurture of your members and attenders?

You.

- How might you contribute to your meeting's culture of eldership?