

## The Difference Between Ministry & Witness

By Dana Kester-McCabe

Lately it seems that people describe anything they do as a matter of religious, spiritual, or social conscience - as a ministry. Ministry has become a word used as a badge of our authenticity and authority. When we describe everything as a ministry we are gradually diluting and diminishing its worth to Quaker religious society.

In Quaker circles, describing everything as a ministry has become a way of defending any practice being critiqued as more secular than spiritual. This is particularly true when it comes to social activism. Activism is not a ministry but a witness.

My experience has been that for the most part Quakers are called to "live humbly and serve God." Many Friends are called to a life of witness. Both witness and ministry are vital to Quaker faith and practice. They are not mutually exclusive. They are often related and overlapping. They are born of Divine inspiration. Love is at their core. But they are different.

If ministry and witness should be valued equally among Friends, why make the distinction? Even at this moment, I struggle to parse what really is the difference between these two activities. Perhaps my struggle is that I do not want to see Quakerism become confined to the albeit noble descriptive of an "activist religion." It is so much more than that to many people.

To say that ministry is about our faith, and witness is about our practice, is too simplistic and not really accurate. Dictionary definitions do not really do justice to the way Quakers use these words.

I am going right out on a limb and say that we Quakers should make the distinction that what we collectively say out of the silence in meeting for worship is Quaker ministry. Those things we collectively do and say outside of worship to live that truth which has been tested by Quaker discernment - is our Quaker witness.

Quaker ministry and Quaker witness are communal experiences. Neither are meant to be done by individuals alone. Quaker ministry is a collaborative message given through the Spirit-led body of the Meeting. No one message given is meant to stand by itself. They are all given in the context of the worship experience. Sometimes one message among several given, may provide personal special meaning for us. But these individual offerings are tested, expanded on, refined by that of God within those gathered in deep devout silence.

The vocal ministry given in Quaker meetings for worship is a unique experience. Clergy in other religions take seriously the belief that when they speak before the flock they are allowing God to speak through them. Quaker worship provides an opportunity for the entire congregation to be vessels of the Word. In a way not only are we all ministers - but we are one in our ministry. Our ministry is a corporate submission to the experience of the Divine, allowing the Spirit to speak through us.

Our worship and the ministry that rises within it make us a religious society, rather than a secular one. It is important that we give as much attention to the health of our meetings for worship as we do to the health of the world we live in. As we nurture our corporate worship and ministry so do we nurture our witness to heal the world we live in.