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What Does Spirit-led Ministry Do?

by Christine Betz Hall

What does Spirit-led ministry do? Way of the Spirit program participants explored this question during our third retreat module in September. We named personal ideals in Spirit-led service, reflected on their sources, then prayed about them together in light of our best understanding of Quaker heritage, our experiences, and any new Light guiding us today. Our answers covered several sheets of chart paper.

One morning I shared anecdotes of faithful men and women from the Christian and Quaker heritage who continue to inspire me—some of my mentors in a vast “cloud of witnesses.” Their lives pose intriguing questions about God’s guidance in ministry. Here’s a sampling of the stories:

Francis of Assisi was a rich young knight before he became a famous barefoot friar, before he wrote lofty hymns to “brother sun”, and before we memorialized him with garden art. In an autobiography, he told of a turning point in his life of wealth and privilege. He was wandering on horseback outside of Assisi’s walls, full of discontent. He passed a leper begging beside the road. Francis had always been disgusted by those stricken with leprosy, an ugly and smelly bacterial disease. But that day, despite his fears, he got off his horse, pressed all his money into the man’s hand, and *kissed* the hand. He began to visit hospitals, even refuges for lepers. After working there, he said, “*When I left them, what had seemed bitter to me was turned into sweetness of soul and body.*” What moved him to that first bold and courageous act? He was surely stretched and empowered by the Spirit. God broke through all his angst and revulsion. Francis invites me to answer the queries: *Who are the lepers I need to kiss to be free for God’s service? What are the fears from which the Holy Spirit yearns to free me?*

Another odd little scene comes from the life of the apostle Peter as told in Acts 10. While waiting for dinner, Peter retired to the roof of a house to pray. He “fell in to a trance” and had a vision that blew his notions of proper behavior in ministry out of the water. An immense sheet full of all kinds of animals was lowered down from the sky. He must have been really hungry! When a voice told him to eat, he refused because some of the creatures were forbidden by religious law. “Do not call anything profane that God has made clean,” the Voice replied. So when a Roman soldier asked Peter to visit and teach about Jesus, Peter realized, “God has made it clear to me not to call anyone unclean or impure,” even non-Jewish military oppressors. He goes to share the Good News, following the nudge of guidance



Foot washing for Beth and Natasha during a *Way of the Spirit* retreat.

in a bizarre dream. This moment in Peter's life invites me to ask: *How does prayer prepare me for guidance into action? How am I open to unexpected or unusual guidance?*

Fast forward to the 1300's in England, where Julian of Norwich lived in small room attached to a church. One of her three windows opened on the street where she watched daily life and suffering. The Black Death swept through, and sometimes bodies would rot in the streets. Julian had suffered her own serious illness, and wrote of visions of the love of God in a famous and theologically strong work (the first surviving English text by a woman): "God is our clothing, wrapping us and holding us in His love, which is so tender and will never leave us." In medieval Christianity, which emphasized God's condemning anger, Julian wrote, "There is no wrath in God . . . It is the most impossible thing that can be, that God would be angry." She acted out her vision in simple caring for others. Townspeople would visit her window to ask for her advice and prayers. She was always available, a ready ear with a heart full of the love of God. When I think of Julian, I wonder: *How do I witness to the love of God amidst suffering? How do I listen and nurture souls?*

Closer to our own times and faith tradition, John Woolman wandered colonial North America on foot ministering among Quakers. He inspires for many reasons, but I've long been intrigued by a little



Way of the Spirit discussion with Eugene, Beth, Stephanie & Noah. All photos courtesy of Christine Betz Hall.

story of his discernment in ministry. Near the end of his life, he wrote of a leading to visit Barbados and talk to the slaveholders there. After nearly a year of preparations, standing at the docks with appropriate Quaker traveling papers in hand, something shifted in him. He wrote that, "not having clearness in my mind to go, I went to my lodging and retired in private under great exercise of mind." John Woolman never goes to Barbados. His writings point to a need for "resignation," and eventually, he finds "stillness," and feels "confirmation" that he has work to do nearer home. This is the inward life in ministry, even when outwardly it makes little sense. Queries

about Spirit-led ministry that rise from this peculiar turn around: *How do I submit in "resignation" to the tasks to which God calls me?*

Who inspires you? If the questions in this article touch you, and you wish to explore and strengthen your own inner life in service to others, consider attending the 2013 cycle of Way of the Spirit retreats. We begin studying and praying about spiritual discernment, January 10-13th, at Shalom Prayer Center in Mt. Angel, Oregon. Details online at goodnewsassoc.org/spirit.

The Way of the Spirit program is growing into a strong second year. The new 2013 cohort will attend retreats on spiritual discernment, blessed community and Spirit-led service. The existing 2012 cohort will continue with three new retreat modules on prophetic voice, spiritual accompaniment and God's provision in ministry. Thank you for your prayers and support.

Christine Betz Hall directs and teaches in *Way of the Spirit: Contemplative Study in Community*, a ministry of Good News Associates. She is a long-time Quaker in the un-programmed tradition, holds a Masters Degree in Transforming Spirituality, and serves as adjunct faculty in Seattle University's ecumenical School of Theology and Ministry. As an experienced spiritual director, educator and retreat leader, she is called to nurture the spiritual lives of individuals, Quaker communities and the larger Society of Friends. She can be reached at christine@goodnewsassoc.org.



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