

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
September 19, 2021
Abundant Ministry

Readings

Luke 10:1-11 (selected)

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs... He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few... Whenever... people welcome you... say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." But whenever ... they do not welcome you ... say... the kingdom of God has come near.'

Kubarak Call for Peace and Ecojustice, Sixth World Conference Friends, Nakuru, Kenya, FWCC World Consultation on Global Change¹

"We are called to see what love can do: to love our neighbor as ourselves, to aid the widow and orphan, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, to appeal to consciences and bind the wounds. We are called to teach our children right relationship, to live in harmony with each other and all living beings in the earth, waters and sky of our Creator, who asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world?" We are called to do justice to all and walk humbly with our God, to cooperate lovingly with all who share our hopes for the future of the earth. We are called to be patterns and examples in a 21st century campaign for peace and ecojustice, as difficult and decisive as the 18th and 19th century drive to abolish slavery. We dedicate ourselves to let the living waters flow through us – where we live, regionally, and in wider world fellowship. We dedicate ourselves to building the peace that passeth all understanding, to the repair of the world, opening our lives to the Light to guide us in each small step."

Marianne McMullen²

"Ministry is what is on one's soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one's mind. It's what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind."

Message

Church tradition says there are three areas of ministry: worship of God, edification of the saints, and service in proclamation of the gospel.³ Our meeting has abundant ministry these areas- inside and outside of our meeting. In addition, in spite of the pandemic isolation we can celebrate that we continued to expand our ministry while keeping the health of Friends and friends foremost in mind.

¹ <https://www.quakerhistory.org/quakerquotes>

² 1987 https://www.fgcquaker.org/system/files/cloud_attachments/Packet_of_Handouts_on_Vocal_Ministry.pdf

³ Bible.org what- church-ministry

I invite you to take a moment to think about our abundant ministry, a kind of inventory if you will. Which ministry comes to mind first and why? Where does it appear Spirit driven? Who does it serve? Which are you most invested in and which would you like to be more involved in? What about it brings you energy and joy and would lead you to invite friends and family to visit? What about it seems hard or heavy? What should we continue or expand? Is there anything you or we as a meeting need to reduce or lay down? Finally are we both moving forward and pacing ourselves for the long term?

The purpose of an inventory is first to recognize and celebrate how God has informed, and Spirit led us to abundant ministry. But we can also ask, “Are we missing anything? Are we on the right course following the Spirit?” These questions can open us up to support the work of our nominating committee. They are ready to start prayerfully discerning with us where we are called to serve.

Our lives have changed drastically and permanently in the past 18 months. Our situation includes: isolation, remote jobs, worship and mission, economic hardship, and ongoing unveiling of deep seated, long existing inequity and injustice. During this time I have heard two foundational and inter-twined queries about ministry. The first query is what is the purpose of the church? The second comes from an observation: people need more than the basics to ensure quality of

life. How do we include people in meaningful work and involvement in community?

The answer to the first question might seem obvious- the purpose of the church is to worship, teach and serve. Yet, that answer seems rote, basic and inadequate. Here is why. During the pandemic many pastors decided to retire early and in a meeting a shocking question was posed. The question was not, “Where will you go to church when you retire?” It was, “Will you go to church after you retire?” Even worse, the answer from a large number was no.

These are people who dedicate a large portion of their lives to service to the church. It is not that they need a break, or need time to find a new church, and will come back. It is not that they are burned out. They are done with church. I have great empathy for them. But I wonder what does church mean to them and the congregation they are serving? And even more, what does their church look like to the community and the people who stand outside?

An article I read said if an employee becomes burned out, they are done. It doesn't matter if the boss gives them time off, reduces their workload, increases their compensation, gives them a more realistic workload, and treats them with more dignity and respect. It is too late. They are done. The only solution is to move them to a new place in the organization, to give them a new perspective.

But what if the whole organization is burned out and burned up? That seems to be what has happened to “church” and not just during the pandemic, though it has done much to highlight the problem. So what is the purpose of church? And can it be given a new place in the organization of our lives, community and world? What is the new perspective it needs from the inside and for the outside?

The good news is this question is about church in general. I feel very differently about our meeting because there is a joy, companionship, and deepening of faith and relationships. So what is it that we are doing right? And how do we do more of it and bottle it and share it with all the people around us?

The second query might be part of the answer. How do we invite people in to meaningful work and involvement in community? During the isolation, people suffer from lack of social interaction. They miss the collegiality of work or school. They have limited interaction with family and friends. There is no volunteer work, trips to the library or even the store. They might have had all their basic needs met, but little opportunity for meaningful work and involvement.

Overall, I find the Friends patient, self-motivated, and able to deal with chaos and disruption. Early on, the people I saw who were thriving admitted things were going to be different and dug deep down to find meaningful work and involvement. So how do we find ways to invite others to join us to this adventure?

A study I read encouraged imagination in bringing our faith to address the longings and losses of people in the world. Technical change accomplished by implementing a new procedure or tool limit us to “inside the building” thinking about ministry. Changing the conversation about church requires adaptive change that brings a cultural and heart-level transformation. This involves re-learning how to learn, listening deeply, being transparent to our human weakness, giving ourselves permission to experiment (and fail), and courage go outside the doors and engage people who have not traditionally been associated with the church.

In order to do this we have to deepen our connection to God and be willing to be radically challenged and transformed.⁴ I see this happening in our discussion groups where Friends are tackling deep questions about faith, racism, inequality, injustice, and inadequate or even false history lessons. Our next step will be to create ways to take what we have learned and engage with people outside.

The readings for today pointed out some important things to me. Jesus sent the disciples- they were not commissioned to minister to one another but to go out. Even where they were not welcomed- the kingdom of God was there. The Kubarak statement is based on Biblical and Quaker texts and it reminds me what needs to be done has long been laid out. Lest I become overwhelmed it says “let the living waters flow through” me; as I participate in building peace and repairing the world

⁴ <https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/changing-the-conversation/>

the Light will guide me in each small step. Finally if I don't know where to begin, I need only to stop and listen. "Ministry is what is on one's soul... It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light."

In an Email theologian Matthew Fox encouraged engaging in bold, abundant ministry saying, "...courage is the most reliable sign of faith in our time."⁵ His example was the ministry of Bishop John Shelby Spong who died on Sunday. Bishop Spong encouraged a life of abundant ministry – he believed in emulating Jesus' ministry of God's love to and for all people, especially those who are often excluded by the church. Fox chose a fitting quote from Spong: "Live fully, love wastefully... be all that you can be... dedicate yourselves to building a world in which everyone has a better opportunity to do the same. That to me is to be part of God and to do the work of God. That to me is to be a disciple of Jesus. Finally that is the way to prepare for life after death."⁶ That is abundant ministry to me.

⁵ Matthew Fox Daily Meditations 9/14/21

⁶ Ibid