

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
June 21, 2020  
Eldering  
I Peter 5:1-11

Reading- I Peter 5:1-11

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.

Message

When I read the scripture passage, the word “elder” stuck out and I got a clear indication that I was to bring a message on eldering. However, neither the idea of eldering nor the message was clear. So I started with some research.

“Eldering” was a term originally used by Quakers for religious training of young adults by their elders. It was not the age of the elders that was important but their experience with Quaker traditions and a spiritual life. Elders taught and corrected behavior.<sup>1</sup> Later in Quaker history only older Friends were appointed as elders, as recognition of superior worth. The appointment was generally for life; to be removed was considered an open reproach and rebuke!

The description in some Faith and Practice documents reveals eldering is a really tough job. “Elders have responsibility without authority.” “[They are] rather austere reformers ... rebuking people for faults and shortcomings.” Being eldered means being rebuked if you “become “offenders’ in any sense of the word...” This

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eldering>

includes pastors; “restraining him if occasion should arise... especially if he “... assumes undue tendencies toward seeking to control the meeting”.

Finally, I found lists of qualifications for and duties of elders are pages long and quite overwhelming. But the only detailed description of when and how to elder someone is to “help them know about the appropriateness of their sharing in open worship ... but not about their tithing, attendance, their presence in helping, or their personal life.” Apparently it is okay to be a counselor, but helping with “... personal problems may be beyond our abilities.” Reading all this it seems being appointed an elder might be a worse punishment than to be removed as one!

So what to do with this eldering thing? How does it fit in our time and meeting? As I opened myself to understanding it, it seems eldering is not mentoring, counseling, or coaching, nor is it meant to be scolding or discipline.

Being an elder does not seem to wait for age nor can it be a life appointment. We all have times of spiritual wisdom and we miss the mark. Age and experience do not always bring wisdom and certainly not in every situation. Our young Friends bring us messages in meeting for worship, in fellowship time, in chance meetings, and in their actions to love and support Friends and those who are hurting in the world. They and we are all on the journey. Enlightenment, spiritual growth and transformation is a life-long journey with valleys and mountaintops.

Appointing someone an elder could turn them into an idol on a pedestal, less than human in their super-supreme elevation. It can have the effect of excusing us from living up to our Light- “I could never be as good as that Friend.” We also see what can happen to the idols from our past and in our today. When the truth about everything they have done and said comes out, whether it is sordid or just poor judgment, anything good they have done seems to become suspect. In my experience, Friends I would consider “weighty Quakers” who might be named elders, are the first to humbly say, “No I am a human being, trying my best to be human; I have done some good things and some bad things. Somedays I succeed with God’s help and others, well, I try to learn to do better.”

Some people set themselves up as elders, mentors, and leaders. And the world certainly selects them for the “success” they appear to have. When I worked in the public sector I was committed to serving and believed everyone there was too. I was fortunate to work with wonderful public servants. This helped when I was exposed to “leaders,” both elected and appointed, who so egregiously took advantage of their positions, abused people and stole public resources that some of them went to prison. I am truly grateful God put the good in my path to help me be prepared to resist the influence of those who were not.

Eldering happens in relationship. That relationship can be life-long; like some of the people who shared their whole lives with this meeting. Their influence on individual Friends and the direction of our meeting has continued long after we

ceased to have their physical presence among us. Other encounters are much briefer, yet the relationship changes us in a moment so profoundly it may even “save our life.” I read a Friend’s story of a time when she was “soul sick.”<sup>2</sup> She felt anger, hopelessness, abandonment- railing at God about the state of the world where God’s people and creation are crushed and abused and “wonderful people... with so much to offer this hurting world, get sick and die.” As she sat on the beach alone in her despair, a young, beautiful African-American woman walked straight toward her. Not stopping to speak to anyone, the woman came and stood above her and said, “Our God told me to hug you.” She remembers thinking, “I have to affirm her gift- that took guts.” A complete stranger! When she asked, “How did you know?” The woman responded. “Our God told me to hold you and tell you that it would be OK.” In those moments, there was comfort and encouragement, and recognition and acceptance of a gift; the women eldering each other.

One of the gifts in my life is my spiritual director. She sits in silence and prays with me. She listens to the Spirit and to me and reflects what she hears. Sometimes she uses words. Sometimes she suggests exercises, queries or readings. Being with her is a special time, devotion and commitment I make to my spiritual growth. But it seems to me that like coaching, mentoring and counseling, spiritual direction is not the same as eldering.

It seems to me that true Quaker eldering requires mutuality in relationship and it is something each of us as Friends who are called to be ministers to each other and the world need to engage in. We will not be excused from this call and responsibility, because while we may find comfort in some traditions and foundation, Friends also acknowledge each of our unique experiences of the Divine, the Light, the Christ is valid and valuable to share. This sharing is an engagement in real conversations in which we wrestle with life, faith and queries together, acknowledging none of us have the one answer, and that we may never even know all the questions. But we help each other trust; trust that God/Spirit/Christ will bring Light to and through us to our self and each other.

We also know that this includes and requires that we engage with those who are different in life experience, age, gender, gender identity, ability, color, faith tradition, and those we do not agree with, like or even have anything to say to. In the home I grew up in I was taught that we did not talk about difficult things that might cause conflict like money, religion or politics. I have had to engage what I feared would be difficult conversations recently. Thankfully I had time to sit and pray and listen to Spirit. What I heard was that I was the difficulty. My fear, defensiveness, and apprehension created barriers that were not needed to keep me “safe.” Once I took time to examine and even forgive myself for my fear, anxiety

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<sup>2</sup> Quaker Life, winter 2020. Leigh Ann Venable

and preconceived notions and self-righteousness, being open to the others was peace-filled. I believe we were able to hear and elder each other beyond the “issue” into seeing each other as humans struggling to discover what it means to be human and to become more loving, caring, kind and compassionate.

One of the things I discovered in those conversation was that hearing Spirit’s leading is not enough. I have to ask is it loving? If not it is not Spirit. And even if is, is what I am doing and saying following the Spirit in a loving way?

Unfortunately this does not preclude what might be called “tough love eldering.” One way I know we must elder each other is to hold our self and each other accountable. When a Friend says or does something hurtful, I am called to respond. I must elder them with love- tell them they have offended so that they can change. But what if they hurt me?! One way I learned I can do this is following the Redemptive tradition. It starts with forgiving myself for being hurt, for not saying anything, for being angry, for whatever might keep me from engaging the person fully, lovingly and peacefully. I then need to forgive the other and approach them in forgiveness; not seeking revenge, restitution, or even an apology. I have to elder them in love, already having forgiven them because what they did or said cannot be undone, it can only be lived through and beyond together.

Finally, we are being eldered all the time. I am responsible to select who I choose for my elders and what attitudes, values, and behaviors shape who I am each moment in my day and on my journey in life. Here is an example. When the pandemic started, many countries declared “war” on Covid- 19. I am sure they thought an assertive approach would be reassuring and help them beat the virus. But one government's message was that of a country coming together. It urged people to "Unite Against Covid-19," repeatedly calling the country "our team ..." with the message: "Be Strong. Be Kind".<sup>3</sup> New Zealand was first to have no cases.

I end with the words to a lovely song that Niyonu Spann sang on an anti-racism Quaker Speak video. “Live up to the Light, the Light that thou hast, live up to the Truth my child, and remember that you are never alone, no never alone. Oh live up to the Light that thou hast and more will be granted thee.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52344299>

<sup>4</sup> Advice to White Men, Niyonu Spann Founder of Diversity 101, QuakerSpeak video