

Dipped in God and Covered in Grace

February 1, 2021 By [Kat Griffith](#)



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Thoughts on Liturgy for Unprogrammed Friends

I'm just going to blurt this out before I lose my nerve: I think liturgy and ritual is good, and I think unprogrammed Friends need more of it.

Please understand that I'm not talking about just any liturgy. I have sat through my share of church services that involved standing, sitting, kneeling, reciting, singing, giving money, taking communion, listening, rinse, repeat. Those liturgical experiences generally didn't set me on fire.

But the idea of ritual and liturgy—that we can shape our interactions and time together so that many of us will come closer to the Spirit—seems obviously



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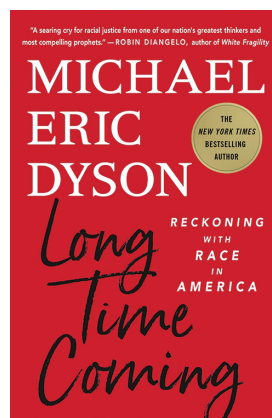
sound to me. Quakers know this. We know that how we set up and run our meetings matters. As Friend C. Wess Daniels puts it in *Resisting Empire*, “We should think of liturgies as those practices, rituals, language, and symbols that shape us in particular ways and for particular ends.” Viewed that way, there are liturgies everywhere: liturgies of political parties and of citizenship, liturgies of consumer culture and sports. Every family has its liturgy around meals, bedtimes, watching Green Bay Packers games, etc.

But we unprogrammed Friends like to tell ourselves that we don’t do liturgy. We’re even a bit smug about it—perhaps imagining all those Episcopalians obediently standing and sitting and reciting in unison while we have our direct line to God without all the fuss and bother of scripts and props.

I see two problems with this view. The first is that we do, in fact, have our own rituals. We have little rules and procedures and ceremonies and special phrases for everything from greeting attenders to giving oral ministry to expressing agreement to clerking meetings. Saying we don’t do liturgy often makes our procedures obscure and bewildering to newcomers who have to figure it all out on their own. It also makes our liturgies a bit invisible to us, which means we don’t interrogate them as often as we should. We can choose between liturgy that is thoughtful and intentional and liturgy that is reflexive and habitual, but we can’t really choose no liturgy!

It is interesting that some highly esteemed Friends have been reinventing forms of liturgy that seem to strike a responsive chord among unprogrammed Friends. Rex Ambler’s Experiment with Light is nothing if not a liturgy for a silent, individual encounter with the Spirit. Parker Palmer’s Circles of Trust and Marcelle Martin’s Faithfulness Groups offer similar practices, as do various spiritual nurture program retreats I have attended.

There is a problem with these powerful props to spiritual growth in that they are practiced mainly by




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individuals or small groups, and almost always outside of weekly meetings for worship. For some people, these experiences may be the most fruitful connection with the Spirit and with the Society of Friends that they have. And yet most of our unprogrammed meetings ostentatiously avoid these techniques during meeting for worship.

This leads some people to flounder in the silence, which may impede the group as a whole from achieving gathered or covered worship in which the Spirit is palpably present.

Keeping these resources separate from weekly worship also means we don't give newcomers, children, or those just beginning their faith journey much of a toehold in our unprogrammed meetings. We set the bottom rung of the ladder way higher than most people can reach without a lot of spiritual formation, and we leave most of that formation to outside workshops and chance.

We also don't give any toehold at all to people whose strengths may not include structuring silence on their own but who nevertheless may have deep and valuable spiritual gifts to share with us, and much to gain from us.

Finally, when we ignore and fail to nurture the different kinds of spiritual gifts that show up in our meetings, we lose people. We shrink our range of authentic spiritual expression; we shrink our membership; and we shrink the presence of the Spirit among us.

And the problem doesn't end at the rise of worship. In the absence of a carefully thought-out liturgy for the welcoming of newcomers, for fellowship, and for ways to build the Blessed Community, many of our meetings are less accessible (and both less Friendly and friendly) than most of the individuals in them.

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Being willing to answer questions about Quakerism isn't the same thing as making someone feel seen, heard, valued, and welcomed. If we don't care to explore the gifts they bring but

are only interested in telling them about us, are we assuming they come empty-handed?

So am I advocating that unprogrammed Friends adopt wholesale the practices of programmed Friends and mainline Protestant churches? No—waiting worship clearly meets deep spiritual needs for many of us. But there are a lot of things we could do on the margins that would enrich or even transform the experience of meeting for many of us, especially newcomers, young people, and those just starting out on their spiritual journeys: those we need to keep Quakerism alive. Thinking liturgically might be a helpful start to making our meetings richer; stronger; and yes, bigger.

Let's say that our goals are to foster individual and collective encounters with the Spirit, and meaningful relationships with each other that are touched and guided by the Spirit.

Regarding the first, what would it be like if our unprogrammed meetings offered the scaffolding of a guided meditation to its attenders? This could be as simple as a flyer with instructions for an individual Experiment with Light or Faithfulness Group meditation, or a couple of fresh queries to ponder, varying these by the week. Alternatively, perhaps a group interested in an orally guided meditation could meet in a separate room for a form of very lightly programmed worship.

What would it be like if, in addition to offering these scaffoldings, we offered breakout rooms or small groups to process what we experienced in the silence? Our unprogrammed meetings usually go straight from silent meditation to social fellowship, with nothing in between. My worship group's recent experience with the Experiment with Light program has brought weekly astonishment and delight at our range of experiences, most of which would not involve spoken ministry in a standard worship setting. The expectation of eventually sharing enlivens our individual practice and encourages fidelity to the process. We really want to share our

insights, our nudges, our chagrin, and our joy—and we are all the richer when we do so!

Furthermore, for those who are new to waiting worship, this sharing provides very valuable insight and guidance about what it is all about. That mystery remains largely unexplained in most unprogrammed meetings, other than vague, ethereal verbiage about Light and Spirit. I've been doing unprogrammed worship for 40 years, and I still find myself reliably enriched by the specifics of others' experiences: the profound, profane, grubby, gritty, comical, and wildly personal forms these experiences take.

What other form might worshipful liturgy take among us? I notice that at our yearly meeting sessions and the Friends General Conference Gathering, some of the most powerful moments are those in which the whole body is singing songs of the Spirit, particularly those involving multi-part harmonies. What is this if not a glorious enactment of our being one body in faith, all our individual voices raised up together? Clearly many of us find music soul-stirring and soul-feeding. Maybe if we weren't so starchy about being unprogrammed, we might actually build in a little more music around the edges of our worship!

In my yearly meeting, music is such a beloved part of our time together that the co-clerk and I have found that the single most effective way to get people in the room at the start of a business meeting is to start singing. Suddenly, the bathrooms empty; the kitchen is deserted; the coffee pot loses its allure; and Friends stream in. Could this be a "the break is over now, and the meeting is about to begin" kind of liturgy?

And then there's our time together outside of worship. I have heard, heartbreakingly, from so many people who showed up at a Quaker meeting at which not a single person spoke to them or welcomed them personally. I recently experienced a monthly meeting on Zoom that responded to my greetings with stern looks and a clear signal that worship began before the appointed hour, and I was

ruining it by saying, “Hello!” And a good and loving Friend I know recently observed that newcomers should expect it to take a long time to get to know people and feel part of the community. No! A thousand times no! If it takes a long time, we are failing, Friends! If someone shows up at your door hungry, do you suggest they show up every week and maybe in a year or so you’ll feed them?

Research shows that contacting a new attender within a couple of days of their first visit is often the deciding factor in whether they return or not. Appointing a “Friendly Ear” or a corner where newcomers may come and ask questions isn’t even remotely a replacement for a personal welcome; a warm greeting; a “I’m so glad to meet you! How did you find out about us? Can we talk? I would so love to get to know you!”

Being willing to answer questions about Quakerism isn’t the same thing as making someone feel seen, heard, valued, and welcomed. If we don’t care to explore the gifts they bring but are only interested in telling them about us, are we assuming they come empty-handed?



Photo by New Africa

Our worship group is intimate by default: there is no back bench in the living room we meet in. But much of what we do to welcome people could be done anywhere. A couple of years ago, we did an exercise designed by Friend Emily Provance to understand our practices better and figure out where we could remove barriers to participation in

our group. This exercise revealed an almost comically baroque set of practices involving welcome. For example, we had some beloved members who pretty reliably ran late. This was annoying to some of us, but having them arrive to an empty kitchen and an already-in-progress discussion didn't feel as fully welcoming as we wanted to be either. How were we to send a message that we valued promptness, not interrupt our discussion with greetings, and send a forgiving and loving message to latecomers? We worked around the problem by starting more or less on time with whoever was there, and had a greeter who quietly rose and went to the kitchen to hug any latecomers and help them get coffee. We didn't wait for them and didn't interrupt our conversation for their arrival, but they experienced a loving personal welcome just the same.

Our liturgy of welcome also extended to the days people didn't show up. When someone who usually came didn't, we sent a card signed by all of us that conveyed our love and let them know they were missed. When occasional attenders went a long time without coming, we did the same. When a new person showed up, we tried to call and send a message within a day or two, saying that we were glad to have met, and we set up a visit outside of Sunday worship to become better acquainted. We visited people in hospitals and care facilities. When one of our members was dying, our little worship group was responsible for nearly half of all the visits to the entire care facility during the last month of her life.

When a new person shows up, we make a special effort to make sure our discussion topics for the next few weeks give us a real chance to get to know each other. We might do a series of spiritual autobiographies, or queries that invite personal storytelling. And we make it clear that our pre-meeting discussion is an integral part of our time together, and you won't want to miss it! Strong communities are not built by an hour of silence once a week.

Our worship group also has a highly developed liturgy of food (described at length in "In Defense of Blue Kool-Aid," *FJ* March 2020), though the

pandemic has shut down most of our in-person gatherings for now. Our host makes great coffee, with real cream, and there are lots of teas to choose from. We have a potluck every time we meet. We hold hands and sing the Johnny Appleseed grace. We celebrate every birthday with a cake, and keep track of birthdays on a special calendar. We always make sure that the people with dietary restrictions can eat dishes prepared by someone else; there's nothing sadder than going to a potluck and being able to eat only the thing you brought! We always have extra containers on hand to send home our abundant leftovers. There are days when I may not feel an upwelling of spiritual gifts in discussion or worship, but if I made a great potluck contribution, well, there's my worthy ministry for the day. Soup for the Kingdom!

Our meetings will thrive and grow when we devote loving attention to how we structure our interactions with each other and with Spirit.

The point is not that everyone ought to mimic these practices. We cannot guarantee that all will find loving community among us just because our efforts are thoughtful, sincere, and energetic. There will be people we fail to reach, and people who won't find what they are looking for with us. The point is simply that meetings need to be energetically intentional in conveying welcome to and interest in all attenders, especially newcomers, and in finding ways for all to contribute. In our worship group, people will be welcomed, hugged, and fed. We'll notice their absence as well as their presence, and we'll keep track of their birthdays. If they suffer a loss, they'll get flowers or a card. If they go through a hard time, they will likely get a care package or a meal. If they are homebound or in a care facility, they will get visits. Importantly, our newcomers also learn that we need them. We've had

newcomers who within weeks were making casseroles for longtime members in need.

During our Wednesday Spiritual Nurture Group personal check-ins, we will share the details of our daily struggles, joys, and travails. We will express our loving concern on Zoom with palms together, hands over the heart, smiles, nods, and tears. We will hear each other's poems; see each other's art; listen to each other's music; and be humbled, amused, and inspired by each other's stories. To the extent that these intentional interactions bring us closer to the Spirit and each other, they are liturgy. And what is good liturgy but a taste of the Kingdom?

Our meetings will thrive and grow when we welcome the widest possible range of gifts and languages of love and faith, be those languages soup or song or psalms. Our meetings will thrive and grow when we devote loving attention to how we structure our interactions with each other and with Spirit. And when we do our Friendly liturgy well, we will be dipped in God and covered with grace: the Blessed Community made manifest.

Blessed Community

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Features



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Kat Griffith worships with the wonderful, Spirit-filled Winnebago Worship Group in east central Wisconsin.

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