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On Why We Need Traveling **Elders**

“The elders’ function is to truly nourish the Life...”

(from *Listening Spirituality, vol. II*, by Patricia Loring
An Inner Strength: Quakers & Leadership, ~ ed. Kathy Hyzy, Bridge City MM, Portland OR

Be mindful, Dear Friends, of the promptings of Love and Truth in your hearts; they are the motions of the Holy Spirit, leading us back to God.”~Traditional Advice, Faith and Practice

“Elders have been essential in keeping me grounded and supporting me as I attempt to be faithful in ministry. An elder is someone who holds a visitor/minister, and those gathered, in prayer and helps to create space for the minister to share the message. The roles of minister and elder are different, but both are based on listening to G!d and to others, and responding as led by the Spirit....

“[There is] lack of knowledge of Friends’ tradition of having elders. I think it is also because our culture is so individualistic. Despite our testimony of community, this is especially true for many Quakers... Even though many of us know we desperately need support and accountability, Friends struggle with the idea of another person’s judgement.

“Eldering is a spiritual gift that some people come by naturally, but it also involves a set of skills that an individual can learn and grow through practice and from others engaged in this work. Similarly elderying can be done well or badly; it is important not to take one example to say that elderying itself is bad. A gifted elder is a gifted listener — someone who can listen to the Spirit and to the minister as well as to those gathered, and provide guidance based on what she hears.”

~ Ashley Wilcox, Freedom Friends Church, Salem OR

Among the practical functions of the accompanying elder is friendship, being someone stable in the life of the traveler, someone who knows you and is trusted. That’s a person who can see when you need a break, who checks in with you regularly. The elder often is the person who assists in driving, takes care of housing issues (remembering to check for forgotten articles), checks out logistics and meals, and so forth, so that the Visitor’s mind can be fresh and focused on bringing their message.

Ministering Elders have, as the traveling ministers needed,

- found a quiet room for the traveling minister to center and not have to interact with people before —or after— a gathering,
- arranged the room in a more Friendly set-up, or checked out the sound system,
- provided a glass of water, or a table for books and papers,
- interfaced with local leaders or early arrivals,
- moderated discussions after presentations,
- made sure the presenter eats, takes a nap, gets dressed and ready on time,
- made sure the gathering ends at a reasonable time and that the schedule does not get over-booked (impromptu events can be wonderful or draining).

An appreciative elder also provides accountability, reporting to the home meeting or sponsoring group, carrying the travelling minute and making sure it gets endorsed, advising

about local situations that the visitor might not know, avoiding minefields, helping to evaluate and interpret events and feedback. All of this is a part of ministry that is invisible to those who are hosting, but which ministers come to rely on. It is essential for a Traveling Visitor's ministry.

The traveling elder does not have to be from the traveling minister's home meeting or accompany her or him on the whole journey, but they should be someone who has some familiarity with the travelers, and continues with them for more than a short time. Visitors who have friendships already in the area they are visiting, may ask one or two to act as elders for parts of a journey. And sometimes visitors end up eldering their elders, helping them in turn, with promptings of Love and Truth.

~ Pablo Stanfield, member of NPYM O&V, University MM, Seattle WA

“Giving honest feedback is emotionally complex. We need to be as affirming, specific and concrete as possible. We are freer to give feedback if we trust the person receiving it will not take offense, but will consider and weigh it for themselves, then apply their own discernment.

“...past distresses frequently impinge, whether things are well said or not. When the words don't feel like they're in the Spirit, whether we like or agree with what is said, we have learned to stop and inquire:”

- Have you heard me? Are you thinking about your own ideas?
- Are you taking this as a personal judgement?
- Is frustration, tiredness or something else in the way?
- Is it true, necessary and kind?

~ Nadine Hoover, Alternatives to Violence Project, NY YM

“I wasn't so enthusiastic about eldering when I began... In the beginning, eldering support helped heal, build my confidence, and liberate the Love I am meant to offer. I learned how fear hinders the work of Spirit; it hampers my willingness to step into leadership roles, closes my heart to the Spirit's nudges, and cuts off my sense of the condition of others whose souls I'm called to tend.

“Some of the best support was after ministry... An elder can help me evaluate in a more balanced way — celebrating the affirmations and listening carefully for hints of what the Inward Teacher might say about where I need to grow. Elders also ask intriguing questions. ...Gentle care in debriefing makes it possible for me to continue to learn and grow in the work before me.

“I'm learning that Spirit-led service has its hazards. Some are unique to my background and gifts; others fall into discernible patterns according to the community. With accompaniment I chart internal obstacles, discern accountability, and avoid burnout. The process invites me to humility— an old word. I aim for humility as a spiritual discipline— cultivating openness to being teachable, an expectation that divine guidance may come through another. The best elders have raised awareness of my growing edge in ministry.”

~ Christine Hall, Way of the Spirit, Whidbey MM, WA