

“**Worship sharing**” is patterned after the Quaker practice of open worship. Like open worship, worship sharing is a time for listening. There are some differences, however. In open worship, Friends tend to speak only if they feel compelled. In the context of worship sharing, you are *encouraged* to speak. Self-disclosure is an integral part of the process. Even if your thoughts seem unrefined, consider sharing them. Sometimes, catching a glimpse of someone “in process” can be more helpful than viewing their finished project. Here are some other guidelines for worship sharing:

Listen to learn. Keep in mind that each person will speak from his or her own perspective. People will feel safest if they can speak from the heart without receiving any advice or correction. If your experience has led you to a different conclusion, there is no need to be anxious. Perhaps there is a larger truth behind the seeming contradictions. In any case, try to learn from what others have said.

Listen with patience. Allow a suitable interval of silence between each speaker. This pause will give everyone an opportunity to reflect on what has been said. In the silence, see if God will bring insight. In general, do not speak a second time until each person has had the opportunity to speak. No one person should speak at great length.

Speak from your experience. In a debate, speakers often quote outside authorities to “prove” their point. It is also common for people to generalize by saying, “we” or “they,” “everybody,” “always,” “never.” In worship sharing, it is more helpful to speak only for yourself and from your own experience. Try to describe the process behind your conclusions.

Some groups may have a hard time holding to the discipline of worship sharing. If your group just wants to talk informally about these things, that’s okay – just be clear (so people don’t enter the discussion with mixed expectations).

Life Together



Discussion Guide

West Hills Friends
Spring 2008

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

When we lived on the East Coast, Erica and I went to visit a reconstructed colonial village in Massachusetts. As you walked through the village, you could interact with people dressed in period costume as they went about their daily lives: churning butter, dipping candles, pressing cider.

There were two places of worship in the village: a Congregational church and a Quaker meeting house. By colonial standards, the church building was ornate. The seats closest to the pulpit were divided into nooks. Wealthy families could purchase their own nook, decorate it as they chose and furnish it with pillows or other comforts. The meeting house, by contrast, was very plain. There was no sign of status among the wooden benches.

Friends have always preferred simple, functional places to gather. In the Quaker tradition, the building where we worship is just a building. It is brick or wood – no more sacred than any other place. In fact, we tend to call our building a *meeting house*. The word *church* is reserved for people.

In the truest sense of the word, West Hills Friends Church is not a building on SW 52nd Avenue. That's the meeting house. Our church is the *people*. If you've spent much time among Friends, then this distinction is probably familiar to you. But what does it mean to say that we are the church?

In being careful to distinguish between *church* and *meeting house*, Friends are doing something more profound than diminishing the importance of buildings. We are *elevating* the importance of people. In particular, we are elevating the importance of community. The church is people, *together*.

Most of the time, we tend to take an individual view of our spiritual lives. We tend to relate to God in the privacy of our hearts. This discussion guide invites us to think about what it means to enter God's presence *together*. What does it mean that Jesus said, "Where two or three gather, there am I in the midst of them?" In our life together, what is the relationship between the individual and the group? How are we called to live, *as a church*?

Let's start with a general discussion of what comes to mind when you hear the word, "church." Do you think of a building? Do you think of an institution that needs to be kept separate from the "state?" When you hear the word, "church," do you feel included or excluded?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to reflect on the ideas and images you associate with the word, "church." After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the word, "church," what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. After everyone has spoken briefly, say more about the ideas and images that come to mind for you. What is your first memory of "church?" Has your understanding changed over time?
3. Describe some of the different church buildings you have experienced. How have different styles of architecture affected you? Are there spaces where you find it easy to worship? Are there spaces where worship seems more difficult?
4. Now for a parallel question about the different *concepts* of church: What concepts of church have you experienced? Are there concepts that you find conducive to worship? Are there concepts that make worship more difficult?
5. In the book of Revelations, a divine voice addresses the "angel" of each church. What has been your experience listening to God collectively (as a church, nation or family)? If God wanted to address *your group*, who would that be? How would you describe the "angel" of that group?
6. Which is better, a church where everyone agrees? Or one in which people disagree?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

REFUGE

About a decade ago, I read a book about vampires. Really, it was a book about artistic inspiration. Why do some artists (like Mozart, Jimi Hendrix or John Keats) burn so brightly then die so young? The author wove a strangely plausible tale of vampires who fatally inspire the artists they love. As the story unfolds, a central character seeks refuge in a church. It works. In the story, people sequestered inside a church building are safe from harm.

Whether or not they are threatened by vampires, I think people really *do* want the church to be a place of refuge. That's one reason why most churches are so homogeneous. My dentist goes to a Romanian church (and no, I'm not going to say anything about Transylvania!). It's comforting to be part of a group where everyone speaks your "language" and shares your outlook on life. It's no accident that there are Korean churches, gay churches, churches for the wealthy and churches for the pierced and tattooed. We feel safest with others who are like us.

It's unlikely that someone with a hawkish view on military policy (for example) would feel comfortable at West Hills Friends. And the sense of discomfort would be mutual. Many of us would feel unsettled by a vocal proponent of military interventions in our meeting. We would start to wonder, "Has the church changed? Is this a safe place for me?" While we can strive to welcome everyone, realistically, we should expect that fostering a sense of welcome for one group will probably leave another group feeling excluded.

Not every difference of opinion generates the same level of emotional intensity. In **Gulliver's Travels**, the title character meets a people who are on the verge of war over the proper way to open a hard-boiled egg. On that issue, we could probably agree to disagree! Other issues are more difficult. Our *sense of self* can be rooted in how we think about the earth, or social justice or scientific inquiry (to name a few). For you personally, what are the issues (cultural or political) that factor into whether you feel included or excluded in a particular group?

For this discussion, please reflect on what helps you feel "at home" with a certain group of people. It might be a shared value, or it might be something less overtly philosophical (like how people dress, whether or not they hug, or whether people lift their hands in praise).

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider what it's like (or would be like) to experience a sense of "refuge" among other people. After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on finding a sense of refuge with others, what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. After everyone has spoken briefly, say more about when you have felt included or excluded. How much is your sense of belonging based on ideology? How much is it based on other aspects of culture?
3. Is the church a safe place for you? Why or why not? How important is it to you that you feel safe in a church?
4. When you are feeling hospitable, how do you make others feel welcome? Are these the same things you would want others to do for you?
5. How *fragile* is your sense of refuge? Once you feel at home with a group of people, to what extent do you continue to question whether or not you are *truly* accepted?
6. Would you say it is relatively easy or relatively difficult for you to find a group of people where you feel "at home?" Would it matter to you if there was *no group* where you could find refuge?
7. In your experience, how do groups set a cultural or philosophical norm? If someone is cutting against the grain of what a group believes, how *should* they respond? What's a best case scenario? What is most likely?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

BODY

lately, I've been listening to a really cool podcast on science. The show is called, **Radio Lab**. If you are so inclined, you can download the whole series through iTunes.

One episode explored the way our *memory* works. We tend to think of our memory as *bits of data* stored away in our brain. We think of our brain as something like a filing cabinet (or, for the more technologically inclined: a hard drive). When we want to remember the name of our third grade teacher, we assume our inner librarian calls up the appropriate file and retrieves the data. That is the conventional view of memory.

These days, scientists can watch the activity in our brain when we try to recall a memory. Instead of seeing one little neuron pipe up to provide us with the name of our third grade teacher, scientists see whole range of activity in many different parts of the brain. It's like one part of our brain offers up the smell of hair spray. At the same time, we get a picture of reading glasses. And still another part of the brain recalls the taste of graham crackers and Kool Aid. The name of our third grade teacher comes to us *in the pattern* of all these associated details. Memory is more like a chorus than a single note.

Paul told the first followers of Jesus, "All of you together are one Body." The Body metaphor reminds us that we *need* one another. We couldn't survive if the whole body was an eye (or a foot or a kidney). In order to be healthy and functional, we need all the different parts working together. It turns out that we even need *different parts of the brain* in order to hold a single thought. I think this insight is of particular interest to Quakers. It is our practice to *gather together* in order to discern the way God is speaking among us. Maybe we can say that God is revealed to us *in the pattern* that emerges from our individual experiences and perspectives (just as *memory* emerges as a pattern in the brain). Usually, when I think about the church as a Body, I assume the "different parts" correspond to different *tasks* (like teaching or encouragement). This image becomes even richer for me if I think of the different parts as a different sources contributing to a fuller picture of God's presence among us.

As you reflect on the idea of a spiritual Body, what do you find appealing? What makes you nervous or uncomfortable? What (if anything) do we have to surrender in order to be part of a spiritual Body? What (if anything) do we gain?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider what it means for us to be connected to one another as one spiritual Body. After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on being part of a larger spiritual Body, what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, please say more. What is your *ideal* for how a spiritual Body might function? What is your *fear* about what might go wrong? What has your experience taught you?
3. What sort of bodily discomfort is easiest for you to ignore? What is most difficult? Thinking now of the *church* as a body, what sort of ill health is easiest for us to ignore? What is most difficult?
4. If a spiritual Body is unhealthy, how can it get better? How does a healthy spiritual Body stay healthy? Who is responsible for monitoring and improving the health of a spiritual body?
5. To what extent can you see yourself connected to a larger body that incorporates *perspectives* or *functions* that seem alien to you? Are there some "body parts" with which you refuse to affiliate? Why?
6. Take some time to reflect on how your small group functions as a Body. Do some people routinely perform certain tasks for the group? Do you associate a certain kind of perceptiveness with any particular person? Out of the silence, tell those around you how you see them contributing to the life of the Body.

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

VANGUARD

In the middle of the 19th Century, a charismatic pastor informed his followers that they were relocating to the Pacific Northwest. The whole community left their homes and shops in Missouri, and traveled west by covered wagon. The pastor, Wilhelm Keil, had promised his son a place of honor on the journey. Unfortunately, the young man died of malaria just four days before the group's departure. In order to keep his promise, Wilhelm had the body of his son pickled in alcohol and placed in a coffin lined with lead. The coffin was placed at very the front of the procession. At one point, a band of Sioux warriors stopped the pioneers in order to peek inside the box. They left quietly.

Eventually, this community settled to the south of Oregon City. They lived according to the principles of the early church: "The believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:44-45). The commune was called Aurora. It became a popular stop on the Oregon and California Railroad. Visitors praised the good food and the music. Today, the Aurora Historical Society has the largest collection of 19th Century sheet music in Oregon – some of it written with blackberry juice!

Aurora is a local example of something fairly common in our history. From Plymouth Colony to Salt Lake City, people of faith have established communities according to their beliefs. We Quakers have our own example. William Penn viewed the settlement of Pennsylvania as "A Holy Experiment." He saw it as an opportunity to build a model society based on Quaker values.

To some extent, every church is a Holy Experiment. How we live together demonstrates what we *really* believe about values like "tolerance" and "peacemaking." Jesus said, "People will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). The way we live together is meant to demonstrate something about how God is at work among us. *We can't do this work alone.* An experiment requires observation, and love can only be observed in the way we live together. The evidence of love in each church should be a sign of God's intention for the whole world – but only if we really do it.

For this discussion, please reflect on how loving relationships inside a church community can serve as a "sign of things to come." What is your image of how people might live together in the full presence of God? To what extent is that image attainable today?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider living at the vanguard of God's Kingdom. After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on what life would be like in the full presence of God, what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, say more about the longing of your heart. What sort of community can you imagine helping you connect more deeply to God?
3. If we can imagine a more perfect life together, why don't we live that way? What gets in the way?
4. What is the danger of being one of the first people to live in a new way? What would make that danger worth the risk?
5. As you think about your ideal community (one that might serve as a "sign of things to come"), can anyone participate? Would people need to change in some way *before* they could live as a full member of this ideal community?
6. Historically, all those ideal communities (from Plymouth Colony to Aurora) have unraveled over time. Why do you think this happens?
7. Even if the church embodies "a sign of things to come," who is reading the sign? Do we do this work for ourselves? For other people of faith? For people who feel like strangers to God?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

FLOCK

British scientists have been looking at the way we human beings move in a crowd. According to their research, a very small minority can have a huge influence on how the overall group behaves. For example, if ten people all start moving in a certain direction, then a whole crowd of 200 will follow their lead. Surprisingly, the crowd will probably fail to realize it is being influenced. People just tend to go with the flow.

The scientists see a number of practical applications for their research. Knowing how to influence the flow of a crowd could save lives. It could help authorities evacuate an area effectively if disaster were to strike. On a more mundane level, this sort of knowledge could alleviate congestion in busy areas. By being able to predict how people move, it becomes that much easier to move them through any given area.

When you put human beings together, we tend to function as a flock. We're like birds. Or sheep. Sheep have a fairly prominent place in our spiritual tradition. The Psalms proclaim, "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100:3). Jesus told of a man who turned away from ninety-nine of his sheep in order to comb the hills for a single sheep who had strayed away. Many of us can picture ourselves as that one sheep, held safe and secure in the arms of the Good Shepherd. Fair enough. At the same time, we are part of the flock. We are one of many.

As members of one flock, those of us in church together have *influence* on one another. At any given time, 95% of us may find ourselves drawn in the wake of a small group that seems to move among us with purpose. If even a small minority works diligently to make peace, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry or care for the planet, the rest of us will feel a tug in that direction. Being part of a flock shapes the trajectory of our lives. Depending on the direction of the flock, our lives will be inclined one way or another.

To what "flocks" do you belong (and how do they influence the direction of your life)? To what extent can you alter the course of your life by affiliating with a particular flock?

For this discussion, please reflect on how the direction of your life has been influenced by those around you. What groups or communities have been part of your journey? In what ways have they influenced you?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider these questions. After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the way your life has been influenced by others, what is a word or short phrase that occurs to you?
2. After everyone has had a chance to speak, say more about your experience. What have been the most significant groups or communities in your life? How have you been influenced by these relationships? To come at this from a different angle, how might your life be different if you had never had these connections?
3. While a "sense of belonging" is generally regarded as a positive value, many of us tend to emphasize a very different set of values: like "independence" and "autonomy." To what extent do you find yourself ideologically resistant to being part of a flock? Please reflect on your answer.
4. Have you ever *intentionally* become part of a group because you hoped that doing so would have an influence on your life? What sort of group could offer the most helpful influence in your life today?
5. Is group influence inevitable? Is it possible to remain so aloof from others that we avoid being influenced in any way? What is desirable about this level of autonomy? What is dangerous about it? What happens if you re-frame the question so you hear it from the perspective of a child?
6. Of course, people can choose whether or not to join a particular group. Other than "at the front door," what are ways to be intentional about the influence of a group?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.