

“**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).

God Speaks (How Do You Listen?)



Discussion Guide

West Hills Friends
Winter 2006

INTRODUCTION

In the Hebrew Scriptures, people talk to God all the time. Adam and Eve converse with God in the garden of Eden. Not only does Noah talk with God, God even shuts the door of the Ark as the water starts to rise. Moses hears God speak from a burning bush. When Jonah falls into a funk because God was merciful, God chides the prophet with an object lesson.

Reading these stories, it seems normal for people to engage God in dialogue. Not only do these people lift their voices to God, they *listen* for God's response. God replies as a friend might reply: sometimes in anger, sometimes with longing, sometimes with a sense of humor.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, God is more than a sender of dreams. God is more than a puppeteer who controls the destiny of peoples, tribes and nations. God is portrayed as a personality – as someone you might *know*.

In the New Testament, Jesus *embodies* the full personality of God. Sometimes, crowds of people gather on the mountainside to hear what Jesus has to say. Sometimes, people invite Jesus into their homes. Some people found the words of Jesus uplifting. Some people found those words scandalous. In any case, it seems normal for people to talk with Jesus. It seems normal for people to *listen* to Jesus.

Throughout the Bible, people listen to God. It all seems to happen so *naturally*. God simply appears and starts talking: “Be not afraid...” Who wouldn't listen?

Most of the time, our experience is far less open and shut. When we listen for guidance, we tend to hear many “voices” (and none of them seem to come from a burning bush or a choir of angels). Whenever we search for a sense of direction in our lives, we probably hear some echo of our parents. We probably hear the expectations of our culture. We certainly hear the competing desires within us.

Most of us know the experience of feeling tugged in different directions. It's rarer to know if any of these “tugs” are from God. How do we discern the voice of God from everything else that acts to influence our decisions?

Not only is it *difficult* to discern the voice of God, the very idea can seem *misguided*. Our culture tends to be suspicious of those who claim to hear the voice of God. Does God really want to ban Harry Potter from the public library and Charles Darwin from the classroom? There is a long, tragic history of people doing terrible things in the name of God. Maybe, if we try listening for the voice of God, we only risk losing touch with more reliable guides (like reason or compassion or scientific inquiry).

There are some very good reasons to be skeptical about our ability to discern the voice of God. Although God's voice may be infallible, our human ears are quite prone to error.

Even so, what if God is truly speaking to **us**? What if we learn to listen and hear the Spirit of the living God within our hearts? Many of us have come to see this as a real possibility. Some of us have encountered the Spirit of God firsthand, and we seek to turn that encounter into an ongoing *relationship*. Others may be drawn to the Light of God they see at work in others (*some* of those who follow God's voice are doing beautiful things!). Still others may be drawn to explore what is possible, without knowing for sure *what* they will find.

Whatever your motivation, I hope this discussion guide will help examine your expectations about how God speaks to you. By better understanding your own assumptions (and how they have developed), may you find insight into the way God speaks to **you**.

Bruce Bishop will be our speaker at All-Church Retreat. He will build on this theme of listening to God. While this discussion guide takes a general approach to the subject, Bruce will help each of us have a better sense of how God speaks to us personally. Don't miss this great opportunity!

REFLECTION ON AUTHORITY

Ladyhawk is a movie about two lovers under a terrible curse. While the sun is up, he is a handsome knight but she wears the form of a hawk. Then, when night falls, she regains her humanity but he is transformed into a wolf. Although they remain faithful, these lovers are kept apart by their changing shapes. One day, the knight tries to recruit a young thief into his plans for revenge. With his voice trembling, the knight says, "I have been waiting many years for a sign from God. Today, God sent you to me."

"That's strange," replies the thief. "I talk to God all the time. He never mentioned you."

When someone tells you, "Here is a message from God." are you inclined to believe it? If a book claims to transcribe the words of God, do you take them at face value? Have you given someone or something *authority* to speak on God's behalf?

Ultimately, authority is something we bestow as a matter of choice. When someone proclaims, "I have authority to speak on God's behalf," we must decide whether we believe it or not. When a book testifies to its own divine origin, we must discern the credibility of that claim. There is no escaping our responsibility in this matter: We decide what will have authority in our lives.

Some people grant spiritual authority to what is *oldest*. For example, they are inclined to believe the oldest manuscript is the best. Other people regard the past with suspicion. They are inclined to put their trust in the *cutting edge*. For example, they might embrace new trends in worship as a way to break free of stale tradition. Still other people measure claims of authority by how it makes them *feel*. There is a long list of criteria that we might use for measuring the authenticity of spiritual authority. It's worth pointing out that no one standard is so obvious that everyone adopts it.

Like the thief in **Ladyhawk**, Quakers tend to believe that listening to God *directly* is the best way to measure something's spiritual authority. A person has spiritual authority *to the extent* that God is speaking through her. A book has spiritual authority *to the*

extent that God is speaking through it. From a Quaker perspective, we *must* learn to hear the voice of Gd in order to discern what has spiritual authority in our lives.

For this discussion, please reflect on the choices you have made regarding spiritual authority. What spiritual authorities have you come to recognize in your life? What are the qualities of that inspire you to set something apart as authoritative?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to reflect on 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 what has spiritual authority in your life, what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. After everyone has spoken briefly, say more about your spiritual authorities. How did these things become authoritative in your life? What is your story?
3. What *practice* connects you to your spiritual authority? In other words, how do you make use of this authority?
4. Under what circumstances do you seek guidance from this authority?
5. Have you always been drawn to same authorities, or has your view changed over time?
6. To what extent is our choice of spiritual authority a product of culture or personality? To what extent can a spiritual authority be *universal*?
7. How has your choice of spiritual authority shaped the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your *relationship* with 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.

REFLECTION ON LONGING

The Psalmist declares, “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” Augustine wrote this about the connection between humankind and God: “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Sometimes, God comes in answer to our deepest longing.

On the other hand, not everyone anticipates feeling warm and fuzzy about their encounter with God. Jonah tried to hide from God’s voice. Moses tried to convince God that his brother Aaron was better suited for divine service (“Lord, send *him*”). There are plenty of people who actually *fear* hearing from God. They assume God will be the bearer of bad news. These wary souls expect God to say things like, “Get thee to a mosquito-infested pit and spend the rest of your life in thankless service.”

Some people may expect God to act in harmony with their deep longings. Other people may expect God to sweep aside their longings and put them on a different path altogether. Either way, it is worth reflecting on a possible connection between our *sense of longing* and the way we *expect* God to speak.

Of course, all this presumes that we *know* our deep longings. Do you? How much clarity do you have about what you really want out of life? How well do you know yourself?

Perhaps, the people who fear hearing from God are those who don’t *really* know themselves very well at all. After all, it would be shocking to discover that everything I have worked for in my life isn’t really what I want. What if I *really* want a life of thankless service in a mosquito-infested pit? How terrible for me!

Clearly, thinking about what you *really* want from life can be a dangerous pursuit. Who knows where it will end? And isn’t it just like God to bury some secret desire in our hearts, so we eventually become *grateful* for things that no “sane” person would want?

Well, maybe God **is** sneaky. Or maybe God is straightforward in wanting to grant our every desire. Maybe God thins out our desires, until they fade away. Or maybe the longing of our heart is a gift of God and the foundation of how God works within us.

There are no easy answers to this. Perhaps there are no *final* answers, either. Instead, we must reflect on our experience. We must hold our *expectations* in the Light. How has God worked with us in the past? How is God speaking now?

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 how God perceives your longings, what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, expand on your first impressions. Do you expect God to be involved in helping you *know* your longings? Do you expect God to help you *achieve* the desire of your heart?
3. To what extent are your longings a gift from God? To what extent are they a product of your culture or personality? In what way does your answer to this question influence your expectation of how God will act in your life?
4. To what extent do you ask God for what you want? Why don’t you ask for more? Why don’t you ask for less?
5. How do you feel when other people ask God for things? What does your attitudes toward others teach you about yourself?
6. Which of your longings have changed over time? Which of them have remained constant? Do you sense that God has been involved in the process of changing your desires (or keeping them constant)?
6. Has your attitude about the deep longings within you shaped the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your *relationship* with 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.

REFLECTION ON REASON

Plato described the human mind as something like a *chariot*. If you haven't seen Ben-Hur lately, maybe you don't remember much about chariots. Basically, a chariot is a little cart pulled around by mighty horses. According to Plato, we are pulled around by our emotions. In fact, they sometimes pull us in several directions at once – with predictably disastrous results.

In order to keep our chariot from veering off course (and crashing into the nearest solid object), we human beings must learn to master our emotions. We must be like the chariot driver who takes control of powerful creatures. According to Plato, it is our *reason* that allows us to stay in control.

In Western thought, we tend to exalt *reason* as the highest human faculty. And we should certainly give reason its due. Thanks to reason, we have electrocardiograms, laptop computers and National Public Radio. And reason has offered useful guidance on what *not* to do (like burn witches).

Sometimes, religious faith is presented as the polar opposite of reason. There can certainly be animosity between the two (just think of the perennial debate over evolution). On the other hand, many Christian thinkers have developed rational arguments for their religious beliefs. People like Augustine and C.S. Lewis have examined faith through the lense of reason, inviting their readers to do the same.

What do you think? Can we rely on reason to guide us into God's presence? When it comes to matters of the Spirit, to what extent should we keep reason in the driver's seat?

A world-class theologian named Thomas Aquinas had a mystical experience while celebrating Mass on December 6, 1273. After this experience, he stopped work on the multi-volume treatise that had been his life's great work. When asked why he had stopped writing, Aquinas replied, "I cannot go on...All that I have written seems to me like so much straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me."

What is your reaction to this story about Thomas Aquinas? To

what extent are you glad that Aquinas found something *deeper* than rational argument? To what extent does it sound like Aquinas gave up rigorous logic for something wishy-washy and subjective?

For this discussion, please consider the role that has reason played in your own spiritual development. Take five or ten minutes of silence to reflect on this matter. After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. Using only one or two words, how would you describe the role of reason in your spiritual life?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, say more about how you are inclined to use reason on your faith journey. To what extent has logical argument shaped your faith? To what extent has logical argument shaped your theology? Is there a difference for you?
3. It's one thing to need a reason *before* you believe. It's another thing to speak rationally about a belief you already hold. After you come to believe something, do you look for ways of explaining the logic of your position?
4. What role does reason play in separating *superstition* from *faith*?
5. Can logic *prove* anything about God?
6. To what extent is reason *universal*? In other words, if you think something is grounded in reason, will *everyone* see it that way? Why or why not?
7. How does your view of reason shape the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your relationship with 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.

REFLECTING ON EMOTIONS

Plato has a hard time competing with George Lucas.

In **Star Wars**, Luke Skywalker zooms across the surface of the Death Star. The fate of the universe rests in his hands. As he activates his targeting computer, the disembodied voice of Obi Wan instructs, "Let go, Luke." Our hero hesitates only for a moment. Then he shuts down the computer and relies on a mystical Force to guide his aim.

In the popular imagination, there is something more powerful than the tools of rational thought. This deeper guide is connected to our emotions. How do you know what is true? The answer is in your *heart*.

As the **Star Wars** saga continues, we learn that *some* emotions are not well suited to a Jedi. As Yoda might say, "Fear and Hatred; to the Dark Side they will lead you." Apparently, even if you accept emotion as a guide, you have to know *which* emotions you can trust.

There are certain "mountaintop" emotions that we might associate with the presence of God. Can we use our emotions like a compass (moving in the direction of joy, perhaps)? Or maybe there is some other emotional state (like serenity or "deep peace") that assures us we are moving in the right direction. What emotion do you associate with spiritual growth?

Maybe we should think more broadly about using our emotions as a guide. We can be mindful of our anger or fear without needing to act on those impulses. Instead of rooting out our "negative" emotions (as Master Yoda would suggest), perhaps we can learn from them. Does God ever speak to us through feelings of jealousy or inadequacy or guilt?

What do you think about using your emotions as a guide to the spiritual life? Are some emotions more conducive to spiritual growth than others? Are some emotions more *dangerous* than others? To what extent do you trust your emotions to guide you into God's presence?

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 connection between your emotions and your spiritual life, what are one or two emotions that seem the most pertinent to this discussion? Try to identify those feelings with a single word or short phrase.
2. After everyone has had a chance to speak, say more about the emotion(s) that came to mind for you. In your experience, how are these feelings connected to the spiritual life?
3. Has God ever made use of your negative emotions to spark an important insight for you? Do you believe God "sent" you these emotions, or did God make use of something that arose from within you?
4. It's not uncommon for people to say they know God is asking them to speak because they feel butterflies. What does this anxiety say about the connection between our emotions and the work of the Spirit?
5. When people speak of "heart knowledge" (as opposed to "head knowledge"), is this synonymous with emotion? To what extent is our *intuition* connected to our emotions?
6. When an intellectual has lost touch with reality, we might say he or she is "purely academic" or "in the ivory tower." Is there an emotional equivalent? What can we learn from comparing these two extremes?
7. How does your attitude toward emotion shape the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your relationship with 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.

REFLECTION ON IMAGINATION

How do you picture Jesus? There are some classic paintings that might linger in your imagination. In one, Jesus has large soulful eyes. His hair is perfect and there is a heavenly light reflected on his forehead. In some pictures, Jesus suffers the agony of the cross. Every once in a while, I get a newsletter from the “Fellowship of Merry Christians.” They always present a picture of Jesus laughing.

Of course, our mental image of Jesus isn’t *really* Jesus. On some level, we know that the picture in our mind is more imaginary than historical. Even so, these images have a great deal of power to shape the way we approach our spiritual journey.

Do we envision God as a wrathful judge? A loving mother? Is God a remote figure who watches us from afar? Or is God closer to us than our own breath? The image we hold of God shapes the way we relate to God. Our spiritual journey is also shaped by the images we hold of “self,” “community,” “sin,” etc.

Medieval cathedrals featured statues, stained glass windows and painted altars. Through these pictures, people came to know the lives of saints and prophets. They formed an impression of this world and the world to come.

Most Protestant groups reacted against the pageantry of the medieval church. In order to keep people from investing too much authority in a particular *image* of God, the Protestant impulse was to stifle visual imagery. Instead, people were expected to know about God through the text of Holy Scripture.

The irony, of course, is that most of the images in the first paragraph are from *Protestant* sources. Our minds seem wired to form images (and not simply abstract ideas). Also (to borrow a phrase from Neil Postman), we seem to be moving toward a “post-literate” society. It’s more and more common for us to get our information from a visual source (like television or the internet). The question is not *whether* we will form images of God, the church (etc.). The question is *what* sort of images will lodge in our minds. Will they serve us well? To what extent do they reveal the

truth? To what extent do they distort the truth?

For this discussion, please reflect on the role our imagination plays in your spiritual journey. If we make use our imagination, is there a risk that our faith will be *imaginary*? Or must some things be grasped by the imagination before they can be grasped any other way? 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. What is a word or short phrase that describes the role your imagination has played in your faith?
2. After everyone has had a chance to speak briefly, say more about how you have used your imagination as a person of faith (or a person searching for faith). Can you identify a painting or song (or some other work of art) that has drawn you closer to God?
3. What creative medium is most useful to your spiritual journey: music, painting, poetry or something else? What about this medium speaks to you?
4. Every once in a while, in the context of open worship, we hear someone say, “This image just came to me...” Have you ever experienced anything like that?
5. Does the popular culture ever capture an image (in a song or movie, for example) that resonates deeply with your spiritual life? What do you think about people of faith drawing inspiration from the images of the popular culture? What are the risks of this? What are the opportunities?
6. How does your attitude toward the imagination shape the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your relationship with 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.

REFLECTION ON OUR BODIES

Ebenezer Scrooge tried to dismiss the testimony of his own eyes by saying to Marley's ghost, "You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!" Even if we can't reduce every experience to some purely physical cause, it's still true that indigestion (or insomnia or illness) can shape our perceptions. What is the connection between our physical being and our experience of God?

As physical beings, we get hungry. Some people go without food as a spiritual discipline. For some, this effort is a way to control their physical desires. Other people fast because the experience of physical hunger reminds them of other "hungers" in life (e.g. hunger for God, hunger for community). The sensation of hunger helps them stay connected to this spiritual desire. Have you ever fasted as a spiritual discipline? What was your experience like?

The other end of the spectrum is illustrated by the movie, **Babette's Feast**. As this film shows, food also has the power to draw people together and to elevate them toward God's joy. Only partially in jest, some people call have called our monthly potluck, "Quaker Communion." Of course, most Christians experience the sensations of tasting, chewing and swallowing when they take communion. In your experience, can eating be a spiritual activity?

Our bodies also need sleep and rest. How does the physical sensation of weariness bear upon your spiritual life? Some people may find themselves at their most creative when the hour is late and sleep beckons. Other people may need to feel well-rested in order to give their spiritual lives their best attention.

Some people are at their best in the morning. Others of us are "night owls," coming alive after the duties of the day are behind us. How does the rhythm of life in the physical world impact your spiritual life? When you are trying to connect to God's Spirit, is there a time of day when this effort is easier or more difficult? Have you noticed similar patterns in your week or month or year?

Some people may find that their approach to God changes seasonally. Do you connect with God in the summer differently than you do in the winter?

While these questions only scratch the surface, please reflect on what it means to be *in your body* as you relate to God. What about the physical universe helps you connect with God? What gets in your way? After sitting with these questions in the silence for five or ten minutes, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. What word or short phrase comes to mind as you think about the connection between your physical being and your experience of God?
2. After everyone has spoken briefly, say more about your own "embodied" experience on the spiritual journey. When was your physical state the most important in your journey? When was it least important?
3. To what extent has the process of aging changed your body *and* your spiritual life?
4. Which of your physical sense (taste, hearing, touch, etc.) do you *most* connect to the spiritual life? Why? Which sense do you *least* associate with the spiritual life?
5. How well do you know yourself, physically? Do you know what physical conditions leave you tired or depressed or unable to focus? How do you care for yourself physically?
6. Are you more likely to turn to God when you are full, well-rested and physically relaxed OR when you are tired, hungry and stressed out?
7. How does your attitude toward your physical body shape the way you *expect* to hear from God? How has this expectation shaped your relationship with 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.