

A Historical Note about Elders in the Society of Friends

by Brian Drayton

First, a general note about delving into our history. The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life, and so it is with history. We must make sure to distinguish between a name for a thing, which may attract our presumptions, and the nature of a thing. We invest terms with meanings derived from all previous history, and look at that collection of meanings and the feelings they raise up in us. The crucial critical step for us when we read Quaker history in quest of guidance is that we feel after the life as it was experienced then, and seek to understand how the community of Friends felt their structures and procedures met particular needs. Then we can learn the lessons of our predecessors and apply them to our present challenges.

Early Friends assumed that persons of mature spiritual stature would be raised up under the spirit's leading in their community, and like many other groups they adopted the term elder to describe such persons -- a term that has good biblical roots. At the early stages of Friends, even into the 18th century, 'elder' was a description of someone's condition, rather than an office to be filled.

Thus, George Fox, the great example of the prophetic minister, was described as "that worthy Elder in Sion," and so also were most of the Publishers of Truth at one time or another. (They were awarded many other functional titles, as well, which often hint at their personalities, such as "son of thunder and of consolation.")

Friends assumed that they would recognize those with especial gifts amongst them, and were advised to rely on their judgment. Fox during his work for the discipline in the 1670s and 1680s encouraged Friends to identify a few elders in each meeting, and these were to communicate with each other and with the national leaders on many points. These Friends, who were experienced in the inward life, were the core of the meetings for business.

The calling of such Friends to service began early. To the meeting at Balby in 1656, whence came the first Discipline, one member from each meeting in the northern shires was to be sent. As Braithwaite points out, this Letter of Balby points its readers to the authority of the Light of Christ:

Given forth at a General Meeting of Friends in the Truth at Balby in Yorkshire, in the ninth month 1656, from the Spirit of Truth to the Children of Light in the light to walk, that all in order may be kept in obedience. . . . Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding these may be fulfilled in the Spirit -- not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

The elders' functions were various, and as with ministers, there were no fixed roles to fill. They were the points of contact for traveling Friends; they arranged the holding of meetings, and had care for the right holding of the meetings for worship (then as now). Sometimes these weighty, discerning Friends,

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"well-grown in the Truth" gathered for mutual support and counsel. Corresponding to the Second Day Morning Meeting of Ministering Friends in London was a biweekly meeting of men Friends not in the ministry.

It was in the 1690s, in Ireland, that we have the first records of elders as a specific office. Elders (a few in each meeting) were to be chosen, to meet separately from the ministers to consider the spiritual condition of the meeting. They were also to attend the meetings of ministers which had been held regularly for guidance, counsel, and refreshment from the earliest days of the movement. Thus began the trend that later became infamous for elders to exercise an influence counterbalancing that of the ministers in the leadership of the Society. In fact, formal meeting leadership evolved into a stable triad of contrasting or complementary roles: elder, overseer, and minister.

The elders had essentially a nurturing role, and one might say that their voice is embodied in our queries, for they were always to be asking questions: How is the meeting for worship? Do Friends have the ministry they need? Are the young being well-educated? Are you regular and punctual in attendance? Are Friends being buried, married, set up in business, and choosing their habitations after the manner of Friends? Are we maintaining our ancient testimonies faithfully? Are our records, minutes, wills, etc. in order?

You can see how this attention to the outward manifestations of inward conditions could grow oppressive if not exercised with real tenderness, and at times it did. The tension with the ministry was noticeable first, perhaps, as the elders' attendance at the ministers' meetings changed their nature. As 'elder' came to mean 'not a minister,' the elder required considerable sensitivity and tact to be able to enter in to the trials and labors of ministers, and give truly helpful counsel. Anyone who has tried this will know that it can easily go wrong, and already by the 1720s some lamented that the meeting of ministers in London had been ruined by the censorious and unsympathetic influence of the attending elders.

By the middle of the 18th century, the structure of meeting leadership had settled into a stable pattern that dissolved (along with so much else) during the course of the 20th century. The ministers exercised charismatic authority; the elders exercised the authority of discernment; the overseers exercised the pastoral authority. The division of labor is thorough. For example, the Wilburite Yearly Meeting in New England recommended that an elder should have care of meeting and close it, to free ministers from the special attention that this duty should entail. More striking, if an elder began to speak in meeting, he/she was to suspend the exercise of eldership, and would wait to see what his/her calling might be -- there was little thought (at least in the discipline) that one might be both. This reflects the important insight that the kinds of inward work appropriate to each sort of service often are very different from each other.

The feeling we have now is that the ministers (one thinks of Woolman, Hicks, Gurney) were the locus of innovation and fresh leading; the elders and overseers spoke for tradition. This is no more true than any such generalization -- true in some cases, inaccurate in others. Certainly elders felt the need to provide stability and continuity during times of turmoil in the Society, and where powerful innovators arose, powerful personalities arose to resist them. The conserving role of the elders led to the negative connotations of the term "to elder."

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During the gradual cessation of the recording of ministers, the calling of elders faded as a practice, as well; the last New England Discipline to encourage their appointment is the 1950, which was discernibly modeled on the Five Years Meeting Uniform Discipline. In both cases, Friends have generally lost clarity and insight about each kind of work as it is lived as a calling, and a proper part of a living meeting. Nevertheless, Friends have perhaps now 'wearied out' these forbidding stereotypes, and can rejoice in the realization that such Friends, gifted with discernment, have an important role to play in the community. They bear in mind our basic commitments as a people; they provide an essential grounding as well for the process of testing and implementing a leading.

Always, Friends in the ministry, or others under a concern, have been encouraged to seek out a discerning elder or two, who should listen with sympathy and honesty to the concern. Not all concerns should be followed, or followed right away; not all should be followed by the one who first perceives the need, or in the form that first appears. An elder who has had experience with many Friends, and who has maintained an inner watchfulness, provides a powerful connection with Truth for the minister or other Friend in the turmoil of leading, confusion, or temptation. We have, however, become hesitant about naming and encouraging gifts of most kinds, in the actual individuals in our meetings (as opposed to abstract quantities) -- thus, we speak about supporting 'the ministry' or 'eldership,' more rarely about supporting ministers and elders. "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed."

A Plea to the Reader

One of the strange outcomes of the history of eldership and ministry among Friends is that elders, unlike ministers, felt no mandate to leave their own spiritual autobiographies (with a few exceptions, such as Dr. John Rutty of Dublin) -- a last act of testimony. Thus the internal dynamics, the calling and growth of an elder, are not documented in anything like the detail we have for ministers. Note that, unlike ministry, the gift of eldership, rarer than that of ministry, is most likely to be noticed and first called out by the community, rather than the person herself; it does not often present itself as a specific task arising within. Most often, it takes the form of an invitation: Would you be willing to serve on a clearness committee? Could you come with me when I visit the neighboring meeting? Would you be on the Meeting on Ministry and Counsel? Could you lead a discussion on this issue? Maybe you could speak to Friend X sometime. . .

Because of this, ministers, elders, and other sensitive Friends must be diligent in a task common to all: in prayer, work, and conversation in the meeting, be on the lookout for a Friend of tender, honest, and simple spirit, who may show in fact or in potential a special ability to listen, to pray, to watch, and to act for the cultivation and health of the community, in collaboration with Friends of many gifts, and with the Lord who gathers us into a people.