

10/13/23

Dear Friends,

I am late in making my report to the meeting for 2022; and soon it will be time for a 2023 report. Perhaps you will accept this letter as bridging both. I will be grateful for any guidance or questions you may have for me, either to probe the past, or consider the future of my faithfulness in my calling.

At an October meeting forty years ago, Salem Quarterly Meeting entered a brief minute in their records, recording their sense that I had evidenced a sustained gift in the ministry.

This brief declaration was not an award, nor an accolade, but the affirmation of something like a covenant: the meeting and I acknowledged that we were joint stewards of a concern, mutually responsible for my faithfulness to the gift. The concern might be enacted in different ways over its lifetime; my attention or faithfulness might fluctuate with changing life conditions; the gift and responsibility might someday be withdrawn. The recording was therefore not a mandate to perform a particular set of duties, only a commitment that I would be watchful, day by day, for guidance and for opportunities to use the gift; that I would be diligent in following such openings; and that I would undertake to continue my spiritual formation and learning, so that I could become a more useful instrument in the work, and align myself more and more to it.

Thomas Kelly spoke eloquently about the importance of focusing on a few concerns, and I came to see that the calling to ministry was one of mine, an organizing and constraining fact of life which was a necessary path for me, if I was going to learn how to live, as best I could, as a disciple of Christ. This, naturally, is laid alongside other gifts in my life – marriage and parenthood, livelihood, citizenship, and a few other such abiding concerns. The meeting's acknowledgment that this concern was a true one has helped me not forget my responsibility to the gift, not for a day in the past 40 years – even if in the remembering, I feel convicted because I have fallen short.

Knowing very well that my work is one little thread in the great fabric of service and faithfulness by which the divine life is incarnated in our world, I have sought to understand as well as I can how my bit fits with others, and to learn about my learning in case it may be of any use to others in their pilgrimage. The impulse of the teacher is a deep element in my personality, and so I have also felt impelled to transform my own experience – including my experience of limitations and failures – by reflection, and by setting it alongside others' experience and reflections, joining in, as it were, in the long conversations of our faith tradition, a community that extends backward in time, and around the world. Teachers must be diligent learners, and the experiments in faithfulness of my friends and mentors in this timeless community have been indispensable blessings.

Now, I understand my calling to be "gospel ministry," and I want to say a little thing about what that means, as I have come to see it. A minister is a servant, who acts under orders, but often must figure out how best to understand and implement those orders, and this (sometimes scary) freedom may grow as the minister's experience grows. A minister of the gospel is one who serves the life of the gospel, which is Immanuel – God with us – in ourselves and others; and calling it "gospel" indicates that this living God is inextricably linked with the character and person of Christ, before, during, and after the revelation in and through Jesus.

While the implications of this commitment are not always obvious or easy to identify, still it does constrain us, because thereby we know that we are seeking to know and live by a spirit whose commandment is love of God and of neighbor, who calls us to a perfection as articulated in, for example,

the sermon on the mount, and whose being embraces life and death, joy and suffering, human and non-human, now, in the past, and in the future. The minister's "job" is in support of this search.

Traditionally among Friends, the ministry of the gospel was in prayer and speech, under the immediate guidance of the spirit of Christ. But the work of the ministry as Friends understand it is not in preparation of ideas or messages, nor in "leadership," but in listening and inward travail (travel). From this inward work, ministers may find themselves led into a wide variety of modes of working – in meeting, or in homes, or other settings, drawing near to the witnessing Light of Christ in companionship with others, and acting, speaking, or keeping silent as led. When I open a new travel journal, I copy in these famous words of John Woolman, as a reminder of what the work consists in:

Love was the first motion, and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life, and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they might be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of truth among them.

Well, this has been my intent, my understanding of the work I am called to. Sometimes I have been adequate to it, often not. Every year I ask myself in prayer, "Does this concern continue, is there life in it?" I believe that this year the answer again is "Yes." You, to whom I hold myself accountable, may sometime or other disagree, of course, and as I have said, I welcome your guidance.

As to what specifically I have been up to in the line of ministry since my last report, that is fairly easily told.

First, I continue to feel, as I have written to you for the past couple of years, that I need to be writing. This has taken two main forms.

I have continued writing in my blog, Amor Vincat (amorvincat.wordpress.com). This is partly a place for proclamation and teaching for those who find it; it is also a way of letting people into my workshop, as I try to digest, shape, and otherwise grapple with things that I read or hear, in the light of my concern.

I have also been working for the past two years on a book I've entitled *The gospel in the Anthropocene: Letters from a Quaker naturalist*. This has now been fully drafted, and with guidance from a small group of gifted, honest, and enduring Friends I am revising and starting to seek a publisher. This project, which for all its slowness has felt most urgent, represents the convergence of most of my "few concerns," as a science educator, ecologist, minister of the gospel, and critter, dwelling gratefully and inquisitively on this astonishing, little-known planet.

I have not been traveling much at all, but during the past year I have, together with Noah Merrill, convened gatherings for ministering Friends. These seem to be happening roughly quarterly, and we have tried to host them in different places around the yearly meeting, to enable as many as possible to attend. This is the sort of thing that is necessary if our meetings are going to have a ministry of depth, variety, and power. For this to emerge, the Friends who are rightly called must grow in their gift, and exercise loving interest and care for each other, as ministers always have in the times of Friends' vitality. Meetings also must grow in their discerning love for the service of those carrying this gift, so that the gospel ministry takes its place as a vital ingredient in the life of meetings, one among many manifestations of the work of the Minister, in whom we can be a unity. I feel called to help.

Finally, I have continued this year with my "midweek meditations," which have been some
As to what the coming year holds, I am very open. No doubt the book will be a continued task, at least for a while. Other writing projects may emerge: the work on William Dewsbury, which I set aside to work on *The Gospel in the Anthropocene*, will probably become a main focus again. I am also starting to suspect that it will be right to begin traveling more in the ministry, but what form that will take I am not sure. If I am asked to do some teaching, I will accept as seems in right ordering. The "ministry to ministers," which has been a persistent, not to say chronic, part of my concern over the past forty years, is likely also to continue.

I will conclude by quoting from something I wrote a while ago, which still expresses my experience:

Jesus teaches us to expect joy in following him, and in our unity through his Spirit with our brothers and sisters. Take time to experience joy in the call to service, and in times when you have served faithfully. The Gospel ministry is costly; yet if it is a concern you are carrying rightly, it is path of rejoicing, and growing peace. The increase of joy, and of confidence in God's reliable presence, has always been accepted as evidence that the minister has been faithful.

This is not to be mistaken for self-congratulation or a sense of superiority, which are antithetical to the joy of which Jesus spoke. In the inward training that we go through, we come more and more to know how to anchor our life and service in divine love, and find our fears diminished and defeated. We become more sensitive to evil in ourselves, our society, and those we meet. We become more compassionate, knowing the many ways that we are likely to be mistaken, deluded, or limited by our personalities, our understandings, our experience, our culture. We feel it more keenly when we come to recognize the Seed's oppression, and we come to understand Nayler's words, when he said that the spirit he felt "is conceived in sorrow, and brought forth without any to pity it, nor doth it murmur at grief and oppression...with the world's joy it is murdered. I have fellowship therein with them who lived in dens and desolate places in the earth."

Yet even so, we are given along with this a heightened sense of gratitude. We become great in thanksgiving, and feel how gratitude is a taproot of prayer and upwelling life. With Fox we "rejoice to see the springs of life break forth in any," and are free to take delight in the multitudinous evidences of the Life and Light, in other people, in the natural world, even in ourselves. As Lewis Benson wrote, "It is a wonderful thing to be called to the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ"

In Christian love your friend,

Brian Drayton