

Voices from the Internet

Collected From an Open Online Survey

6/22/09 – 6/27/09

What is your experience during meeting for worship? What does it feel like to be in Meeting for Worship? What sensations, thoughts, and/or emotions are present while you worship in Meeting?

At the beginning, my experience is one of getting my own thoughts & feelings out of the way. Sometimes I hold individuals or the whole in the Light. When I am most successful in getting self out of the way I settle into the worship, there is a quality of resting in Spirit. Unless of course Spirit has something particularly for me, in which case it may not be restful at all!

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

"This varies a lot. I am trying, sometimes intensely, to relax & get off the squirrel wheel enough to let God it a word in. It used to matter more whether this was a word to pass on to the rest of the group. Usually I'm annoyed at the beginning by people chattering before they start. I've generally stopped the nodding-out-&-catching-my-falling-head over the years.

There are times (usually with another group) where I can feel the 'power' of other people tuning in. (It's hard to say what this is like."

Forrest Curo, San Diego Meeting

My experience in Meeting for Worship varies from week to week. Sometimes I am able to "center down" quite readily and find the still spot where I can feel God's presence and hear God's voice. Other times this takes much longer, as I labor to get through the layers of "stuff" that I have brought into the room from my daily life: anxieties, cares, wishes, hopes, etc. Getting through these layers successfully doesn't mean suppressing them but somehow offering them up. Hard to describe.

Anonymous, 15th Street Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

Do you mean the usual, or the ideal? Usually, I am running late, and my hair is wet from the shower. I am out-of-breath and met by a certain usher who quietly teases me as he hands

me a bulletin. I enter quietly and sit near the back while announcements are being delivered. I breathe and try and center and be present to the Spirit that is there. I do my best to open and listen and catch a thread of groundedness to carry me through the programmed parts of the service. I appreciate the program. I love to sing and lift my voice to praise the Divine alongside my community. I listen to the concerns of the community, the scripture and the prepared message and try to hear God in it. What is God trying to teach me? I always look forward to the silence. The last part of our service is unprogrammed. I think of the silence, or ""communion in the manner of Friends"" as a clear, blue swimming pool in which I can spiritually cleanse.

In full-hour unprogrammed worship there is an opportunity to sort of slowly wade in, get used to the water, and slowly soak, and eventually to gracefully glide under the water for a bit, before hanging out at the side, and exiting.

There's no time for this in a programmed or semi-programmed worship. It's time to get down to business. So you *dive*--jump right in and feel it, all the way. The shock, the sharp intake of breath, the dousing of goodness.

I jump in and breathe (or vice versa) and immediately start pouring out my heart in prayer. I play, I see how long I can stay underwater, present to the experience, and if its a particularly good, centered time, I may try and sit on the bottom, rest in God's magic peace.

I listen, and try and be present. The thoughts that come, I check in with my gut, heart, and mind. Is this for me, God? Anything that should be shared?

(This is my internal dialogue.)

No? Whew, okay, just you and me.

Yes? Really? What? Are you serious? I must be making this up. Okay, I am gonna get really still and listen. Are you still talking, really?

Betsy Blake, First Friends Meeting, Greensboro, NC (NCYM-FUM)

I wait on God. I wait on God like a daughter who has a highly valued and respected parent or beloved teacher in their house, in joy at the visit and ready to do what God wants. God is the one with the plan and the power, not me.

It can be hard work and boring especially if people are confused or spiritually asleep. I think the point is not to evade what is real but to bring everything into Christ's light. Sometimes it is a real rest and blessing, when I can feel a unity with other Friends, fellow labourers for Truth.

I attempt to worship God by centring myself in Christ's love and light. If stuff is bothering me and I am finding it hard to worship, I pray to be able to worship God as God wants to be worshiped. I try to listen to the messages with God's love and understanding, and I try to join in with sung ministry and prayers, either with my spirit or with my voice as seems appropriate.

Alice Yaxley, Britain Yearly Meeting

My experience in meeting for worship is different depending on the day, the weather, how much sleep I've gotten the night before, you name it--it basically comes down to what baggage (mental or emotional) I've brought with me, or conversely been able to lay down prior to coming. Most of the time, my feelings about being in meeting for worship run along a spectrum, anywhere from "well, this was a nice pause to my otherwise hectic life" to "I've just been hit over the head by a spiritual 2x4" (although lately, I have to admit to feeling less of the latter and more of the former). I've experienced the quaking sensation of needing to give voice to a message I've received, not often, but sometimes.

Mia Kissil Hewitt, Chatham-Summit (NYYM)

"It depends on the particular meeting for worship which I attend. Some meetings are very dry, and I find it very difficult to be centered at all. My thoughts wander and I feel very far from God. In other meetings, however, God feels very near to me and I am comforted and/or instructed in how I am to move forward.

Some meetings, some very precious meetings, are such that I feel God's presence not only with me, but with the whole group. Somehow, I sense God present in the gathered Body, not just in my own individual life. Messages - of challenge and of comfort - come for the gathered Body, not just for me.

I cannot be sure what makes one meeting for worship different from another, but I have my theories. I believe that the humility and receptiveness to God's guidance in the hearts of those gathered makes the difference between a dry meeting and a gathered meeting. When we are full of self and think we have the answers, we do not let God in to give us the Answer. If we have spent the week forgetting God, one hour on Sunday is normally not enough to rouse us from our stupor.

If, however, we strive for faithfulness throughout the week, being disciplined in our prayer and handing continually our lives over to God, I believe that our meetings for worship will be rich indeed; we will feel Christ's presence among us and be spurred into action for His Kingdom. "

Micah Bales; Great Plains Yearly Meeting

My experience is one of release and a quieting of my spirit after a week of information overload. For the first little bit my emotions, thoughts and sensations are heightened, almost frenzied, and as time passes a stillness creeps in and brings my tired mind to rest.

Gil George River's Way Community, NWYM

I am aware that everyone is working on their spiritual journeys. Sometimes I have thoughts I want to share; i push them down- if they persist, I share them. It is very rewarding when someone gives another message related to mine that helps me enlarge the thought or thanks me for the message. I always spend sometime in thanksgiving.

Ruth Hyde, Rochester

It varies. When I am spiritually dry it doesn't feel like much, but I know that I need to keep coming during those times for the sake of the long haul. There are thoughts and emotions that I bring with me when I come to meeting. Coming to meeting is a time to set personal thoughts aside and just listen. During good periods I am able to do this and often "hear" God speaking to me. It is not an actual sound. It is more like the sensation you get of understanding what you have heard just after someone has spoken to you.

Anonymous, NCYM-C

The experience is varied, depending on how well prepared I am for meeting, what is going on in my life and how capable I am of drawing close to the Inner Light. I have literally shaken before a message and find myself shivering when I have delivered the message. I don't speak unless I have some very specific physical cues that I have learned to "read" as signs that the message is to be shared.

I love meeting for worship. What does it feel like? The most consistent feeling is when it begins and I settle into the silence like I would settle into a hot bath after a long cold afternoon of cross country skiing. There is a sense of doing what is exactly right to do when I begin meeting for worship.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

Meeting for Worship carries a range of feelings, thoughts, and emotions for me, most of which I wish I could ignore, and simply bask in the Presence. I think of a lot of good ideas that are not Meant to be shared. I have a lot of judgments that are only useful to me if I figure out where they are really coming from. More recently, as a time strapped parent, I feel great gratitude for the space of worship, although this often is paired with a tiredness I wish would go away for an hour. When I get centered, for that brief moment, I feel Truth waiting to be tested or heard. I feel notions that are so much more true than my own ideas. I feel a palpable presence, rarely, that settles me into my faith, reminding me that we have access to Depths far beyond ourselves, that there is always a Hand at my back, and that my purpose is more complex than I can imagine (although probably quite simple too)

Gordon Bishop Grass Valley Friends Meeting – PacYM

I step across the threshold into the Divine Presence. Sometimes. Sometimes it takes me a long time to wake up or calm my thoughts enough to be fully present and aware of that presence.

Anonymous, Strawberry Creek Meeting, Pacific Yearly Meeting

What is the "point" of Meeting for Worship for you? Why do you think we worship together as a community?

Many points. Someone told me just last night of the ways the worship was just what he needed last Firstday. So one is healing. One is being community by doing community, by the shared experience. One is hearing truth, one is transformation. Loving one another.

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

"It's always been that one time a week I could be sure that I would be reminded to tune in to God's influence.

Doing it with others increases the amount of easily-available energy for aligning oneself. Some people seem to diminish that amount; I'm not sure why they are there (They don't seem to get much out of it) but we're a small group, & these are the people we've been sent."

Forrest Curo, San Diego Meeting

The point is to hear God. To really participate I must be open to hearing God as an individual, but I must also be open to hearing God through the spoken or silent ministry of others in the room. I think we worship together as a community because part of what God wants to do for us and with us is to make us into a community that embodies his love and models his love for humanity. Such a community is in a real sense Christ's "body". The point of vocal ministry is to "edify" (i.e. "build up") the body.

Anonymous, 15th Street Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

The point is--I know this isn't very Quakerly--but it's ritual. It's a way to mark the week, check-in with God in a place that is community-supported. The point is to gather with other seekers and believers to share, learn and teach. It's a way to "reset" the week, start fresh. It's a way to check in at regular intervals with my spiritual family. "There is a deep, full, restful, alive silence. Given ministry is rich and *heard.*"

Betsy Blake, First Friends Meeting, Greensboro, NC (NCYM-FUM)

I go to Meeting to listen together with my community to the Living God, Truth amongst us.

Christ has come to teach his people himself. I am here to listen and to obey. I am a busy mum with a baby and I don't get to do the kind of worship I used to do at home, so we are really much more dependent on our Meeting for help to listen to God together.

I understand we are meant to fill our hearts with God and wait in God's love to be instructed, in the endeavor of following Christ Jesus and witnessing to how the Kingdom is always just starting to break out amongst us. Meeting for worship with a concern for business is exactly the same just often with a pre-agreed agenda instead and a clerk to record.

We worship together because we need each other to help each other live a life of service to each other and the world in God's grace.

We need to be reminded of our purpose; we need to recognise each other's gifts and support each other in their proper exercise for the glory of God, the giver of gifts.

Alice Yaxley, Britain Yearly Meeting

I guess the "point," if there is one for me, is to take that time out of an otherwise hectic life. There is so much time that I feel like I spend on autopilot--doing the laundry, working for pay, picking up the toys, that it is necessary for me to have a set time out for stopping all that. As much as I've tried to set myself up with a worship time at home, it rarely works for me--I need that other place to go to, and the other people to hold me accountable, or I find too many justifications for not doing it. Worshiping together allows us to give and take from each other, to feel like we are not alone in the world.

Mia Kissil Hewitt, Chatham-Summit (NYYM)

The reason that we come together to worship is that we might be drawn together as one Body in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Meeting for worship is our spiritual communion, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst is our spiritual baptism. We gather together in the name of Jesus and are baptized into that name. We are comforted by the Spirit's presence, and we are called to service so that Christ's love might be known by all.

Meeting for worship, when practiced in Spirit and in Truth, is the act of uniting the Body in one Spirit. It is an act of spiritual union, being brought together under one Head, Jesus Christ. In submission to Christ, we become one Body; we become Jesus' friends, because we do what He commands us. We are given unity of spirit and unity of purpose. And we are loved.

Micah Bales; Great Plains Yearly Meeting

The point for me is to join with others in worshipful expectation, knowing that through the gathered meeting all of our pieces of the divine image will speak more clearly than one piece alone.

Gil George River's Way Community, NWYM

It is easier to focus when I am in meeting than it is alone. "One memorable gathered meeting occurred when I was having a dialog with a group of students and one started by reading from Martin Luther King. I deep silence ensued.

Ruth Hyde, Rochester

Joining together in community makes it much easier to listen to God. The presence of other worshipers helps me to be drawn into the silence. I do find that the power to draw me into the silence depends on how centered the other worshipers are.

Anonymous, NCYM-C

Meeting for Worship is to renew and recommit to the Inner Light and the life we have chosen. It is a time to review one's concerns, lift up one's joys, and griefs and offer them up to the One who comforts and embraces. Worship in community keeps me honest. The weight of other friends who are also drawing close to the Divine is a continual support and reminder of what we are all working at.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

For me, the point of Meeting for Worship is communion with God. This is facilitated by the presence of others who are in this same field (not with the same words, but headed in the same inward/Godward direction). We worship together because we are all needed in this process of helping each other approach God. This approaching necessitates humility, grounding, openness, inspiration, guidance. No one person can provide all of this. The more gifts that are Rightly shared in the process of worship (on Sunday at 10 and during the rest of our collective lives), the more likely we are to receive the most True message of Love. Love/God is so vast and gets interpreted in so many ways, so multi-faceted and multi-functional, that we must sink to the deepest places we can as a group to best receive/absorb what is ours to receive.

Gordon Bishop Grass Valley Friends Meeting - PacYM

I want to be with people who are as hungry as I am for companionship in the Sacred Center, struggling as I am with being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, joyful at being joined together into a common body.

Sometimes this actually happens.

Anonymous, Strawberry Creek Meeting, Pacific Yearly Meeting

How would you describe a "covered/gathered meeting"? Can you describe a particularly deep or memorable meeting for worship? What made it that way?

Best for me is still Francis Howgill's words (find at <http://qfp.quakerweb.org.uk/qfp19-08.html>) about being gathered into a net. Sometimes the messages all connect, but that is not necessarily always a sign of a gathered meeting. I wonder whether all must experience the meeting to be gathered in order for it to be gathered...except that I know that some Friends might be so deep that they are beyond experience. I question whether a meeting that some perceive as gathered and others don't can in fact be gathered, however.

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

Not a term I'd use. Sometimes there's a power one can feel like a high-intensity silence being broadcast, sort of a silent om in the air--like what a certain rabbi might have called 'chanting aleph.'

With a group of Buddhists, invited to lead a period of 'quaker meditation'--sitting in the front and feeling the 'energy' of all those people meditating together..."

Forrest Curo, San Diego Meeting

A covered meeting is one in which the presence of the Spirit of God is palpable for all or nearly all of those present. This may come after many words or after complete silence. I have been in many such meetings - too many to single one out for description. At the same time, I have sometimes thought at the time that a meeting was "covered" or "gathered" only to find out later that others perceived it differently.

Anonymous, 15th Street Meeting, New York Yearly Meeting

It has been a long time, unfortunately since I have experienced this. I will never forget a meeting-for-worship with Friends from different traditions. We had wrestled to understand one another and it had been very hard.

At one point, I felt led to share, stood up, heart pounding, and could hardly get a word out. I began to mumble and cry. I sat down frustrated and embarrassed. Soon after, another Friend from another tradition stood to share.

He said, ""I think what Betsy meant to say was..." and went on to share the message that had been given to me. He was an FGCer and I was an FUMer and we had very different backgrounds and beliefs. Other Friends from other traditions expanded on the message and suddenly we were in unison. This was a turning point for our group, and I think we all felt

God very present that evening."

Betsy Blake, First Friends Meeting, Greensboro, NC (NCYM-FUM)

There is a unity of purpose, a core of people who are there doing the same task, worshipping God. No idolatry; humility. Tenderness of heart to each other and to the world, which is required to do God's bidding.

At the World Gathering of Young Friends, Deborah Saunders ministered and listening to her I knew what I was on earth for and I knew I could be liberated from fear. I think she has a gift of ministry from God and exercised it faithfully. We were there ready to meet with God and to receive the gift of God through her faithfulness.

Alice Yaxley, Britain Yearly Meeting

For me, there is a "thickness," or gravity in the room during a gathered meeting. Time becomes irrelevant--it neither speeds up or slows down, but just falls away. I could be worshipping for 15 minutes or six hours, and it would still go to that deep place. Most of the gathered meetings I've experienced have been called ones. I recall one meeting when the daughter of a member had been imprisoned overseas, and the following day was going to be going for trial. A large quotient of people gathered the evening before as a support to the parents and our community. The worship began with fretting and general concern for the imprisoned person. As time went on, there was a change in the room, and you could feel the whole room turning the matter over to God. I remember the barometric pressure dropping, and a thunderstorm rolling in as we worshiped. Finally the mother of the imprisoned woman spoke (she rarely speaks in meeting), and it was clear that the words were coming through her, not from her. It was truly no surprise to me when we heard the next day that the trial had gone the best way it could have gone.

Mia Kissil Hewitt, Chatham-Summit (NYYM)

In my understanding of the terminology, a "gathered meeting" is one in which those present feel bonded together in the presence of the Holy Spirit. In my experience, the air is palpably "thick" with the sense of God's presence among us. A "covered meeting" is one in which not only are we gathered in God's love, but the Risen Christ is actively teaching the Body a common lesson. Messages are coming, not just for one person, but for many, for all. In such a meeting, we know the living truth of George Fox's words, "Christ is come to teach His people Himself."

An example of a covered (and gathered) meeting would be the extended worship that was

held at the YAF gathering in Burlington in February, 2007. Christ was present among us, actively teaching us about love and unity. We were being gathered together for a purpose, and shown our oneness in Christ's Spirit.

Micah Bales; Great Plains Yearly Meeting

A "gathered" meeting is not easy to describe. I have been in both calm and riotous gathered meetings. I think that the hallmarks of a gathered meeting are a felt presence of the Spirit and an openness to follow wherever that Spirit leads. We had some people come by who were new to Friends and had no idea what to expect from a meeting for worship and business, but actually stopping and entering into times of silence together instead of trying to convince each other of the validity of our positions really was shocking to them. The desire to discern the will of the Spirit rather than each pushing their own agenda made that meeting special to me.

Gil George River's Way Community, NWYM

Another time at FGC I was hiking in the rain. Later the sun came out and we came upon a glade with pink azaleas. I stood there in silence and as each person arrived they joined me."

Ruth Hyde, Rochester

I remember one of the first times I went to the Yearly Meeting and worshipped there. The pull of the silence was so profound that it felt like I needed no preparation or effort to set aside my trivial thoughts and worries. I was like stepping into a whirlpool and remaining there for an hour that seems much too short.

Anonymous, NCYM-C

In a gathered meeting, as I have experienced it, it is impossible to draw away from the Divine. One is gladly caught and lifted up and knows that others are experiencing the same thing. Imagine the feeling of being at a Peter Paul and Mary Concert, or a Pete Seeger concert, or any concert where everyone is singing the same song with heartfelt joy. It's like that, but deeper, much deeper and because it is a sense without words, it is known in a different part of ones being than the normal verbal places we inhabit most of the time.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

Berkeley Meeting 1999 or 2000 (yes Berkeley! Vine Street Baby!) A friend shared a message that truly achieved the purpose of ministry, (was is Samuel Bownas who said it) which is to "take them to the guide and leave them there". This Friend is a seasoned Friend, who has spent much of his life dedicated to service in the Quaker world.

I was so stirred by the message (which I have no recollection of now - so I was stirred in my encounter with the place that the message took me) that I later erupted in ministry "I am so in love with you God." This feeling was shared by many in the meeting as many friends told me after the rise of meeting, and I could, we could, just feel a sense of something much greater than all of us put together had happened that morning. As we looked around while shaking hands, the smiles of peoples faces told the whole story. Covered meeting - no doubt.

Gordon Bishop Grass Valley Friends Meeting - PacYM

When a meeting is "covered," that is, when we have allowed God to wrap us all into a common sense of divine presence, sometimes the meeting doesn't break--the meeting runs long, because whoever is supposed to close it doesn't want to break the connection; then we all shake hands, or join hands, and fall back into worship.

Different people in such a meeting will have different images and experiences--one might see a web of flame connecting all of those present; another might hear a voice; another might fall into a deep feeling of Presence without words or images. But many or all of those present will know that something has happened that is much deeper than everyday experience, deeper even than many useful and profitable Meetings for Worship.

It is foolish to strive for such a sense of being covered by God's presence, foolish to engage in discussion or debate about whether this or that meeting was "covered" or "gathered." It happens sometimes. That is enough, and more than enough.

Anonymous, Strawberry Creek Meeting, Pacific Yearly Meeting