

# Comforters, Radiators, and Stopping By: The Ministry of Presence\*

**Carol Holmes & Ann Davidson, facilitators**

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The ministry of presence is where all other ministry begins. Presence is a state of being, not doing. Such states are not highly valued in our culture. We prefer action. So those who watch others rise to speak in meeting or travel under the weight of a concern might not recognize their own calling to the ministry of true presence—the ministry of simply "being with" another person or group.

True presence has a quality of quiet 'every-dayness' to it. Think about a down comforter bringing a sense of coziness and security on a cold, dark night. Or a radiator filling a room with warmth from a source elsewhere. Or some friends sharing cool drinks on a shady porch on a summer's day, talking about nothing in particular, if they're talking at all.

In this workshop, we'll consider comforting (without fixing), radiating from that source elsewhere (without using words), and stopping by—in this case, stopping by Friends meetings with no other desire than to worship and be with them.

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### Our Tradition

"From the beginning Quakers have felt a special bond that has overarched geographical and cultural boundaries and has made easy the offer of hospitality to traveling Friends on the one hand and quiet confidence of welcome on the other." *Faith and Practice of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting*, 1997.<sup>i</sup>

"Visiting among Friends strengthens our Society. Individual Friends and Meetings are advised to take part in and encourage such visits." *Faith and Practice of Baltimore Yearly Meeting*, 1988.<sup>ii</sup>

"We value visitation with other Friends, including visits beyond monthly and yearly meetings. This practice furthers our experience of an extended family." *Faith and Practice of New York Yearly Meeting*, 1998.<sup>iii</sup>

"Travelling to visit and worship with Friends, both within our yearly meeting and beyond, is greatly to be valued. It helps to bind together the family of Friends. London Yearly Meeting endorsed its value in 1925: 'We should take an interest not only in our own particular meetings, but also in other adjacent meetings, especially if they are few in numbers or otherwise in need. The visitation of another meeting in the spirit of Christian fellowship is an act of service, even if unaccompanied by any words of spoken ministry. When carried out under right concern it may bring encouragement and refreshment both to those who visit and those who are visited.' " *Faith and Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting*, 2004.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 1997, 56.  
<[http://www.pym.org/publish/fnp/fnp03-pages\\_34\\_to\\_64.pdf](http://www.pym.org/publish/fnp/fnp03-pages_34_to_64.pdf)>

<sup>ii</sup> Baltimore Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 1998.  
<<http://www.bym-rsf.org/quakers/pubs/FaithNPractice/fnp5.html#IIIB5>>

<sup>iii</sup> New York Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 2001.  
<<http://nyym.org/quakerism/fnp/p36.html>>

<sup>iv</sup> Britain Yearly Meeting, *Faith and Practice*, 2004.  
<<http://www.quaker.org.uk/qfp/chap13/13.21.html>>

### The Prayer of Carrying

Within the fellowship there is an experience of relatedness with one another, a relation of upholding one another by internal bonds of prayer that I can only call the prayer of carrying. Between those of the fellowship there is not merely a sense of unity when we are together physically; with some this awareness of being bonded through a common life continues almost as vividly when separated as when together. This awareness of our life as in their lives and their lives as in our life is a strange experience. It is as if the barriers of individuality were let down, and we shared a common life and love. A subterranean, internal relation of supporting those who are near to us in the fellowship takes place. We know that they, too, hold us up by the strength of their bondedness. Have you had the experience of being carried and upheld and supported? I do not mean the sense that God is upholding you alone. It is the sense that some people you know are lifting you and offering you and upholding you in your inner life. And do you carry some small group of acquaintances toward whom you feel a peculiar nearness, people who rest upon your hearts not as obligations but as fellow travelers? Through the day you quietly hold them high before God in inward prayer, giving them to Him, vicariously offering your life and strength to become their life and strength.

This is very different from conventional prayer lists. These are not a chance group of people. They are your special burden and your special privilege. No two people have the same group to whom they are bound in this special nearness. Each person is the center of radiating bonds of spiritual togetherness. If everyone who names the name of Jesus were faithful in this inner spiritual obligation of carrying, the intersections would form a network of bondedness whereby the members of the whole living church would be carrying one another in outgoing bonds of love and prayer and support. . . . This mystical unity, this group togetherness of soul, lies at the heart of the living church.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kelly, "The Reality of the Spiritual World." In *The Pendle Hill Reader*, edited by Herrymon Maurer, 39-40 (New York: Harper).

"Faithful to the Promptings of Love"

*Lloyd Lee Wilson says hello to a lot of people. He writes about being "Faithful to the Promptings of Love" in Walk Worthy of Your Calling.*

"Love is (was) the first motion" is the classic description of the beginning of a leading to travel in the ministry. In my case it manifests as a recurrent drawing of one's thoughts to a particular group of Friends. Often this begins for no apparent outward reason, but is then reinforced by a series of seemingly unconnected "coincidences" that involve those particular Friends. Over time this grows into a felt need to be with those Friends.

In my travels I have often met with the question, "What do you think is wrong with our meeting that you feel the need to fix by traveling to visit us?" ... I have always been able to assure the questioner that I don't necessarily think anything is "wrong" with their meeting-often I know next to nothing about their meeting. What I do know, and this has been confirmed over and over again by experience, is that if I am faithful to this drawing to meet with certain Friends, if I am agreeable to meet with God and them where they are, something divinely good will happen. That does not mean that I know, before or after, what that divinely good thing will be. †

† Lloyd Lee Wilson, "Faithful to the Promptings of Love." In *Walk Worthy of Your Calling*, edited by Margery Post Abbott and Peggy Senger Parsons, 96 (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2004).