

▮ RUFUS M. JONES
▮ **The Vital Cell**
WILLIAM PENN LECTURE, 1941

William Penn Lecture 1941

The Vital Cell

Delivered at
Arch Street Meeting House
Philadelphia

by
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Published by The Book Committee
Religious Society of Friends
Philadelphia and Vicinity
302 Arch Street, Philadelphia

FOREWORD

I shall assume that those to whom I am speaking today are young, at least as young as I am. The age which the calendar reveals for each one of us is not very important, nor is the size of our bald spot; nor the grayness of our hair. The really important thing is the quality of freshness and elasticity in our spirits. There is no use talking to minds that have congealed and set, and whose windows are not open for new light to dawn, and expectant of it. This Lectureship is sponsored by young Friends. This is their hour and I am their spokesman. There is no use saying anything about the local Meeting as a vital cell unless the youth are to be in it and are to feel their share of responsibility for its life and its development. Much that I am saying today will call for courage and faith and adventure and newness of vision, which characteristically belong to youth.

Published 1919 by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
Republished electronically © 2004 by Quaker Heron Press
<http://www.quaker.org/pamphlets>
email: pamphlets@quaker.org

new cause. Edward Burrough, the son of Thunder, was nineteen when he began his remarkable career of leadership. John Audland was twenty-two. James Nayler was eight years older than Fox, but still a young man. Richard Farnsworth, one of the chief leaders of the movement in the North, and William Dewsbury, the sweetest and wisest of the leaders, were about the same age as George Fox. Richard Smith, the first Quaker on the American Continent, was apparently young and certainly a leader. Of the eleven Argonauts who came over in the ship *Woodhouse* and planted Quakerism in New England and on Long Island – all but one – William Brend, the chaperone of the party, were young, as was Mary Fisher who preceded them. One of them, Christopher Holder, had an ear cropped off, and one of them, William Robinson, a youth of college age, was hung for his faith on Boston Common. These men and women had very early in life found their way to the heart of the new movement. Robert Barclay was eighteen when he became a Friend, and twenty-eight when he published the first edition of his famous *Apology*. He was only forty-two when he died.

If we are to have a revival of spiritual power, our youth must be at the front of it. And we must as Friends live in a world of reality, and adjust our lives to the vital issues of the present and the future. Never has this Society of ours been more needed in the world than in this critical period of human history, but we cannot be “matched with this hour” without fresh awakening and a deep renewal of heart and mind and vision. We need to feel the experience of which Isaac Penington wrote from his Jail to Thomas Ellwood, who was also at the time in Jail: “May the eye and heart in thee be kept open, and mayest thou be kept close to the feelings of life, and thy spirit be kept fresh in the midst of thy sufferings. Mayest thou find everything pared off which hindereth *the bubblings of the everlasting springs, the breaking forth of the Pure Power.*”

THE VITAL CELL

There is a tendency, which of course is quite natural, to appraise Quakerism by its public occasions, by its World Conferences, its Five Years Meetings, its Yearly Meetings, or by its impressive work of service for World causes. Here are objective facts and definite records which the wayfaring man and the news reporter can read. The fresh experiments in Peace making, carried on in the midst of the destruction and hate of wartimes, and in areas of conflict in peacetime, have quite naturally attracted wide and sympathetic attention. It has been plain to see that there is a more excellent way of life which can be and has been practiced in the midst of agony and violence. That is worth taking note of and it has been widely signalized.

A few great personalities have given a very impressive character to the entire Quaker Movement. George Fox is now recognized as one of the major spiritual prophets of the period since the Reformation. Coleridge and Emerson, Charles Lamb and Carlyle, George Bancroft and William James, are a few of the distinguished men of Letters, outside the Society of Friends, who have seen his full stature and have raised him, to a commanding position.

William Penn, as the founder of one of America's greatest Commonwealths, the exponent of a Holy Experiment with the ideals of Democracy, and a writer of commanding style, became the Quaker *par excellence* in the mind of the French, in the eighteenth century, and he has always held a place of rank by the side of George Fox. John Woolman is

the outstanding saint in Quaker History, and he has come to be thought of as the Saint Francis of the Quakers. In courage of conviction, in wisdom and persistence of method of attacking a gigantic evil, and in his quiet but extraordinary reliance on Divine guidance, he is in a class alone by himself. To add to his just fame he had a unique style of writing which has made his *Journal* the classic to which Charles Lamb and Charles William Eliot and Sir Frederick Pollock and many others have given generous recognition. Elizabeth Fry, though not quite, I think, the equal of these three in quality or importance, has, by her remarkable service to humanity, taken her place in the list of the greatest Quaker figures of History, where also John Greenleaf Whittier and John Bright belong.

The Quaker contribution to education has received marked attention and has added to the high appraisal which the public has awarded to the Quaker movement. There are ten Quaker Colleges in America, some of them of first rank in the estimation of educators. Johns Hopkins University, Cornell University and Bryn Mawr College, each owes its foundation to a Quaker, and Brown University recognizes a large debt to the famous Quaker Moses Brown and his family. In the field of primary and secondary education the Quakers have been not less creative and have shown equal leadership, which in some of our States has permanently affected the prevailing school system of the State, if not of the country. But when all is said and done, and the accounts are all in, not many Quakers have been great, not many have been distinguished, and our contribution to the moral and spiritual wealth of the world does not bulk very large. We have not produced statesmen who have plotted the course of History. We have made but feeble contribution to the theological thinking of the world. We have contributed little to the perennial stream of truth through the years and for

to build or rebuild the kingdom of love in the world. What is done for that purpose ought as far as possible to be a demonstration of the spirit of love and reconciliation.

We have in the past endeavored to make our demonstration of love and conservation effective on both sides of the conflict. We rebuilt the French villages which the Germans destroyed in the last war, and then we went over the line and fed the German children. We brought relief in Vienna, and at the same time plowed the fields and fought the Typhus in the regions of Poland which the Austrian army had desolated. We fed the children on both sides of the warring lines in Spain. That principle of creative love and reconciliation, that demonstration of the spirit, that builds a kingdom of peace, is the more excellent way, which we as a people cherish and practice. Our method of nurture must build this spirit, this way, into the inner fiber of our youth. We must form insight and conviction, vision and ideals, in their souls. We must aim to organize and sublimate natural instincts and make them the driving forces of deep-lying faiths and ideals of life. There is no easy way in this rugged world. We must pass over from the supremacy of things to the supremacy of personality, and we must put the note of eternity into all our activities and our concerns of time.

Finally, as St. Paul would say, we must take ourselves much more seriously than we usually do – at least as seriously as the world takes us! We must be more *adjustable*, more responsive to the Spirit of God who goes on before us to lead us into greater truth and larger life for ourselves and for the world. We must, too, draw much more than we now do upon the leadership of our youth. Early Quakerism was in the main a *youth movement*. George Fox was twenty-three when he launched the movement, and twenty-eight when he found “the Seekers” and organized the Society. James Parnell was nineteen when he died a martyr to the

we believe that it is the most effective way to deal with the issues of life, and in the third place it is the only way to safeguard the infinitely precious treasure of man's divinely touched personality. The most important thing in the universe is to save and transmit Christ's estimate of man, His spirit, His ideals of life and His way of life. That is the experiment to which we are dedicated.

It is obvious, then, that neither of the twins whose names begin with "Non" – neither non-resistance nor non-violence – is good enough for our purpose. And it would still be deficient if we had quintuplets named "Non." Withdrawals and refusals, and the whole battle-line of negations, leave the central problem of life unsolved. Nobody cares very much for what we *do not think or believe or stand for, or refuse to do*. The real issue is what peradventure we are going to do with these recurrent crises that successively confront us. Of course we are going to be non-violent in the face of violence, for violence builds no kingdoms of the spirit, but unfortunately non-violence does not of itself build kingdoms.

I have always loved Gerard Winstanley's confession of faith: "My mind was not at rest because nothing was *acted*; and thoughts ran in me that words and writings were nothing and must die; for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act thou doest nothing." It is an over-statement, but it is the kernel of the matter. In this business of building kingdoms of truth or peace or love in the world, *thou must act*. The action must be as brave, as fearless, as sacrificial, as self-forgetful, as is the soldier's. We cannot sever ourselves from community life, from public responsibilities. We are tied in and enmeshed in the social order, and we cannot cut the human connections which are as deep as life. When we say: "Here I stand. I cannot fight with weapons of destruction," we are bound by our inward convictions to fling ourselves at some creative human task that will help

the ages to come. Our deepest significance as a people, and our major importance as a religious movement, lie in a sphere which eludes public appraisal and can hardly be taught and tabulated. In fact this central mission of ours – this heart and pulse of Quakerism – has not always been brought to consciousness even to Friends themselves, and is always in need of fresh interpretation at the home base where if at all the scoring is done.

What is it we were born to do; for what mission came we into the world as the bearers and exponents? As I see our mission, across the years behind us and in front of us, it is to demonstrate and exhibit a type of religion which reveals the life of God in the lives of men. The Gospel we proclaim and incarnate claims that God is forever humanly revealing Himself, loving, yearning, suffering, sacrificing, redeeming, working now, as of old in Galilee and Judea. The Real Presence of God here with us is the heart of our faith. The discovery that all life, in our meetings, at our meals and in our day's work and business, can be and should be a sacrament is one of our most distinguishing features. We stand for a religion of first-hand conviction, a religion rooted and grounded in experience, a religion whose authority is as little endangered by science and higher criticism as is the authority of the multiplication table, or the truth that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.

The one danger here is the danger of losing the significance of man's spirit as a reality of the eternal order. Our Quaker Movement has caught up and continued in the world the faith that God created man in His own image and after His own likeness. There can be no question that we as persons have biological traits and that the mark of the animal is on us, as the hairs on our arms indicate, and in us, as many of our instincts suggest. But something else, and

something higher, is just as unmistakable in our structure. The divine likeness does not lie in external conformity. It consists in spirituality of being, in a moral and spiritual integrity of soul. He has made us for immortal life and has set eternity in us. "The spirit of man," as a great text of the Bible says, "is a candle, a flame, of the Lord."

We do carry in us, deep at the center, something that is not of the biological order, something that makes man a being of infinite worth. This religion of life and of suffering love, this religion which makes man a being of infinite worth, would be bound, if it is genuine, to flower out into human service, and to share the burden of human suffering, and to be concerned about the culture of the mind and the soul of children and youth, and to take up the task of the peacemaker, as has been the case with the Quakers, but its central inner significance as a religious movement can come to light and does come to light at its best and highest in the practice of mutual and reciprocal correspondence of man with God. If the evidence of the truth and reality of this intimate relation between God and man should fade out, and if man should come to be considered by us, as well as by the world, only as a top-notch biological specimen, then the whole Quaker structure would, I am convinced, topple down like a house of cards. Its strength and its genius as a religious movement lie deeply centered in this inner junction of the soul with God, tested and verified not merely in the lives of a few rare saints, but rather in the experience of the rank and file of us in our three hundred years of history.

The laboratory of our faith, then, is not in our occasional great public gatherings, or in events which attract the photographers and reporters, but in our local Meetings scattered across the country, from South China in Maine, our easternmost post, to Long Beach in California, one of the farthest west of our Meetings. It is in these vital cells

opprobrious. It is time we got our Quaker position over into the glowing affirmative, and made it stand out as the strikingly heroic position, the hero's choice of issues.

We can do that only by the dedication of the entire inner being of ourself to a way of life which is seen and felt and known to be good in itself, good without any qualifications. It must be an adventure one enlists in for his whole life, and not merely for the duration of a war. It must be a holy experiment with forces of the Spirit, an unceasing effort to put love and truth into circulation in the currents of human life. It involves an uncompromising faith in Christ's way of overcoming the world, not by miracle, not by a legion of angels, but by self-giving, adventurous, sacrificial love, that never lets go, never fails, but bears and endures all things to the end. It is a lasting experiment year in and year out to do away with the causes and occasions for war, by removing, or aiming to remove, the fundamental grounds and evils from which war springs. It endeavors to eliminate the roots and seeds of it in the social order, and to form, or to endeavor to form, an atmosphere and climate that is unfavorable to war. This experiment with the armor of light and the weapons of the Spirit, this purpose to overcome evil by the forces of goodness, cannot come to a halt when the larger world, not yet committed to the experiment, decides to resort to guns and bombs, to slaughter and destruction. The Quaker ideals cannot be dropped to suit the shift of weather. The experiment cannot take a vacation or a furlough. It continues in all weathers, even in hurricanes and tornadoes.

If any one asks, why in a world depending on weapons of violence and destruction, we go on with what seems like a precarious experiment, we answer, first that it is Christ's way, and we believe that He calls us to it, and that the eternal will of God is fulfilled that way. In the second place

the training of heart and mind and spirit, the emotions and the instincts, for the comprehension, the realization and the expression of the Quaker Peace Testimony. Every time there comes a war-crisis, and the issues are sharply drawn, a large number of our youth meet it with confused minds. Each time there is a war, it is ostensibly presented as the occasion – probably the last occasion – to defend and safeguard some profound and essential moral principle. The war is fought in turn to end slavery, to end war, to end fascism and save democracy. It looks each time as though a supreme issue were at stake, and as though a live-blooded man, with any stuff in him, must hear the call and be ready to make the last full measure of devotion and sacrifice. That of course is the natural way for a heroic spirit to react, and there are always Friends in these crises who spontaneously react that way.

There is always a larger group who are thrown into mental confusion. They feel a stop in their mind. They halt between two opinions. They hate war. They abhor the thought of killing. They know vaguely the historic position of the Society to which they belong. But they cannot clarify their minds. They cannot get a clear and decisive voice of conscience. They hate to go back on the cause for which their fellows are dying. And so the moral issues are batted back and forth in their minds, and they are unable to find a sticking place. The words that are frequently used for the person who is dedicated to the Peace Testimony have a feeble sound and are negative words of weakness. “Pacifist” is a noble word, if it is taken to mean *peace-maker*, but it is usually pronounced and taken as “passivist,” a person who reneges and proposes to do nothing. It is an ignominious position and one shorn of heroic fire or moral passion. “Conscientious objector,” shortened and further weakened to “C.O.,” is equally negative and unsatisfactory, if not

that our life really centers, as life always does; it is here that the life-stream of our faith is fed, or fails to find its true supplies. These little islands of ours, surrounded by a secular world of drive and grind, are the real experiment stations of the spiritual life where it is being settled whether we are to be the purveyors of light and life and love and truth, or whether we are to end in sterility, like Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, which end in desert sand.

The primary function of these local meetings, these vital cells of our Quaker movement, is spiritual refreshment and the sustaining of souls in the meeting for worship. This spiritual refreshment, I shall assume, is the central feature of a local Quaker community. I know that at the highest moment of worship self is entirely out of conscious focus, and there is no thought of refreshing or equipping or fortifying the soul. The worshipper is so entirely in love with God that he is not calculating about returns. He forgets himself, loses himself, in his outpouring and upreach of love and adoration. But that forgetting and that losing of self is precisely the way to health and refreshment and restoration. There is no way to find yourself until you discover how utterly to lose yourself.

A genuine Friends Meeting must be something more than a number of individual atoms occupying the space in a meeting house. So long as the “atoms” hold on to their precious individualism and remain detached, the worship will not rise to any great height. Worship at its best and truest is corporate. The walls of insulation fall away. The pluralism vanishes. The many members are fused into one body. Each helps all and all help each. Robert Barclay has beautifully described this fusing of life into a corporate unity. “As many candles lighted,” he says, “and put in one place, do greatly augment the light, and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together into the same

life, there is more of the glory of God, and His power appears, to the refreshment of each individual, for he partakes not only of the *light* and *life* raised, in himself, but in all the rest." Barclay adds his own testimony: "I myself am a true witness; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil in me weakening, and the good raised up." Isaac Penington said something very similar out of his experience: "They [the members of a meeting] are like a great heap of burning coals, warming one another, as a great strength, freshness and vigor of life flows into all." Whittier has given the best account I know of this *depth-life* in a meeting group. It is the description of a meeting in "Pennsylvania Pilgrim."

"Without spoken words, low breathings stole
Of a diviner life from soul to soul,
Baptizing in one tender thought the whole."

This great sacramental experience is not confined to seventeenth century meetings. It is not something over and done with. I have been in meetings like those which Barclay and Whittier celebrate. I have seen tears roll down faces in the gathered silence, and I have felt the sacramental power fuse the group into the communion of a united whole. But this does not happen unless at least some of the members go to meeting *prepared* for this supreme business of the soul, and unless there is in the meeting a widespread attitude of *expectancy*. Worship is mutual and reciprocal correspondence, and it calls for a double search – a reaching up from below and a divine movement of grace downward from Above.

Hardly less important and significant for the spiritual life of a meeting is its constructive and creative ministry. There are perhaps some seasoned Friends who find their

to our present Quaker way of life. It had a high technique of spiritual nurture. It got its Quaker ideals across to its youth, and the home and the meeting passed on the torch to the new generation. We cannot revive and adopt their technique. It is past and gone with its century. Our task is to create a new technique which fits our age and our mental climate. But it must be done, or we shall fail at the source.

The home is the true place for this nurture, and the atmosphere of the home is more important than any overt method of training. Where the meeting becomes a vital cell it will quietly invade the homes of its members with a calm creative spirit and with new moulding forces. One immediate effect of the vitalization of the meeting will be, I trust, the silent renewing of the spirit of the homes that constitute it. Nothing is more important for the rebuilding of the moral structure of our national life, and the reconstruction of the social order of the world, than restoration of the home as the center of spiritual culture. Love is the greatest thing in the world, and there is no substitute for the home as the formative center for the growth and ripening of love.

But the meeting has a more direct duty to its children and youth. Provision should be made for telling the children the story of the Quaker movement in interesting and attractive ways. It is a thrilling epic, full of heroic events which children love. I used to sit and listen to "the life and sufferings of Sarah Grubb," but there are better methods now than that of reading of *Journals*, mainly full of experiences foreign to our youth today. The aims, the ideals, the foundation principles will always appeal if well presented, and children respond very quickly to the reality of the divine presence when they have an opportunity to feel it and practice it, for children belong to the Kingdom of God and expect to find God.

One of the most important features of this work of nurture which falls to the home and local meeting will be

wheels, as in the Negro spiritual, “turn by the grace of God.” It is just as serious for a meeting to be regimented by the heavy hand of unexamined custom and habit as it is to be regimented by other ways that we fear and dread. Each age must find fresh and living ways of solving its problems and doing its work, and not go on using static and mechanized customs, merely because they have the sanction of years behind them. We ought to get rid of our dead wood and have “fresh groves and pastures new.”

One of the most important concerns of this vital cell ought to be for the spiritual nurture of the children and youth of the meeting. The very continuing life of the meeting depends on it. Imagine a military Chief of airplane service who should build up a vast fleet of planes and then do nothing to train the men who are to “fly” them. Well, in some things the children of this world are wiser than the children of light. Mothers in India begin training their children to meditate when they are four years old. When do our Quaker families begin to train their children in the significance of silent worship and communion? We are in a world beset with noises, with radio and jazz and movies and dance and war and horrors. If ever the spirit needed to be calmed and deepened with the reality of God, it is now. But these infinite and eternal treasures of the soul do not come without care and oversight and training. The dins and noises, the hum and go, and secular attractions, beat in on us on every side unsolicited. But the slow formation of spiritual ideals and counter attractions which build the soul and shape the character come only through patient and painstaking nurture. To go along and keep step with the prevailing mass-culture of our age, with its din and noise, is to make a major betrayal of our Quaker faith.

That period of quietism in our Society, which we are apt to call dull and peculiar, at one point at least was superior

souls sufficiently fed in the silence, who do not need, or at least think they do not need, the ministry of spoken words. But most persons who compose a congregation are carrying burdens, often too heavy to be borne, and there are always some who are “oppressed by the heavy and weary weight of all this unintelligible world”: and who need a *lift*. They look for inspiration and guidance. They want to have the significance of life and the grounds of immortality brought to light.

All great ministry is ministry of interpretation of life. We are at the present moment weak in this ministry of interpretation, and weak in the lifting power of messages of illumination and inspiration. There is a place – an important place – for brief testimony, for the few words of experience, or of Scripture reference, or of quotation from the ripe experience of others, but there ought to be much oftener than usually happens that other type of ministry which opens windows for the soul, and which raises the whole level of life for the entire congregation. Such a message ought to be followed by a deepened silence, and if more words are said after the silence, they should, if possible, fit and carry on the message that has spread over the meeting. Preaching if it is true preaching ought not to interrupt the worship; it ought to continue the spirit of worship.

But how is it in the range of possibility in most of our meetings to expect such ministry of interpretation and illumination? Well, one of the main difficulties is that it has not been *expected*, and very little has been done to encourage and foster this type of ministry, and to nurture and develop it in persons who revealed a potential gift. It is just as true today as it was when it was “opened” to George Fox, in 1647, that Oxford and Cambridge cannot “make a minister of Christ.” But what is not so often “opened” to the Friends who have the responsibility for the life of our meetings is

that no one, however divinely gifted with the spiritual afflatus, is likely to be miraculously equipped for the creative interpretation of life in our generation.

Life in our times has been profoundly secularized by a thousand drives and influences. But one of the most subtle and insidious of all these influences has been the scientific implication that man is merely a complicated biological specimen, the later offspring of flat nosed baboons, and in the last analysis the curiously shaped product of the earth's crust - of the earth earthy. It can hardly be expected that one can lift life up in all its spiritual significance and make an effective demonstration of the life of God operating in the life of man, or to give convincing evidence that Christ is a life-giving Spirit to modern groups without a certain amount of intellectual background. There has been a widespread loss of faith in immortality, which naturally goes with the acceptance of a biological estimate of man, and Friends greatly need to have the eternal aspect of life brought to light with power and authority. But that cannot be done by merely quoting texts of Scripture. It comes back once more to the call for a deepened interpretation of life by persons who have faced the issues, who understand the problems of our time and can speak to the age in demonstration and power.

A great many persons who have gone to Haverford College in my period have gone into the ministry in other churches. Some of the students have become effective Quaker interpreters of life, but many more should have been and, I am convinced, would have been if they had received the right encouragement from their home meetings. The point I am now making is so vital that it may be taken, I think, as crucial for our continued existence as a people. This is a new age of "seekers," the world has turned to us with extraordinary expectation. Why is it so few join us?

and girls to be shepherded. There are sorrows and hungers to be relieved, as real, if not as poignant, as those Elizabeth Fry found in Newgate. We have too easily assumed that a local Quaker Meeting lives unto itself, is responsible only for its own worship and ministry, can then shake hands and go home to a good dinner. That is not enough. It is an eternal principle of life itself that it can be saved only through self-giving. Life takes on the glow of consecration only when it "loses" itself for the sake of others. These little Quaker islands of ours, which dot the length and breadth of our country, would stir with new life if they suddenly found themselves awake to the tasks of life which lie ready to hand just there where they live. This deeper responsibility to the community would bring new life and deepened interest to the monthly meetings which in many places have become dull and thin.

A monthly meeting ought to have live and quickening interests. Few things are more deadening than perfunctory performances, dull routine wheezing occasions, which everybody, especially everybody under forty, dreads. Either such meetings ought to be freshened up by bringing in new creative interests, or the number of meetings should be reduced. Fifth wheels, with no functions, should be removed. There is no reason why to the end of time functionless meetings should be carried on, just because they have always *been* carried on. Where there is little or no business that needs attention in small meetings, the number of monthly meetings held in the year might profitably be reduced to four, and these four made *vital* occasions. The first principle of spiritual efficiency is that no meetings shall be dull and dead.

We are always in danger of having Ezekiel's vision come true of wheels within wheels, wheels above wheels and wheels underneath wheels, hoping always that some of these

meetings in the power of God.” Few tests would make us more humble than that. Is the meeting a laboratory demonstration that God and man meet in mutual and reciprocal correspondence? The time has come for us to focus on what is primary in importance, and to be open-minded and conciliatory on all matters of secondary importance. Through all the Quaker generations, from George Fox to the present time, the central feature of the Quaker movement has been the reality of the life of God in the lives of Quaker men and women. Even in that dull period of strict discipline, of the regulation of garb and speech, and legislation on the height of gravestones, there was a succession of saints who had a divine anointing, who had the Name written on their foreheads and who “knew God experimentally.”

If these meetings of ours, these vital cells, are to be power-stations, they must feel a much greater sense of responsibility than they now do for the welfare of the community in which they live. There can be no question, I think, that our humanitarian work through the Service Committee has profoundly affected the attitude of the world, and particularly of the other churches, toward us, but what is much more important is the fact that it has heightened our own spiritual power, increased our corporate unity, and made us much more conscious of our divine mission in the world. These local cells would in like manner be vitalized, if they took up in a corresponding manner and degree the work of ministering to the needs, or some aspect of the needs, of their local communities. Not long ago a social worker knocked at the door of a home in his community, A woman opened the door a few inches and said: “You needn’t come in here, me and my husband, we don’t take no interest in nothin’.” You can see her starved life, her poor, thin, single-track existence.

But the sad fact is that there are persons like her within easy reach of almost every meeting house. There are boys

Why is it that some of our oldest meetings are slowly dying before our eyes? The answer is clear and plain. “Seekers” are often disillusioned when they visit our meetings. They look up too often and are not fed. In many cases they do not find the answer; they do not have their condition spoken to. They go away sadly, and they wonder. I should not say it, if it were not so, and of course I am not thinking primarily of these two yearly meetings in Philadelphia, and I am well aware that there are notable meetings, fully alive and pretty well filling the need of the times.

Our main question is, How is this situation to be met? How are weak meetings to become strong? There is no easy answer. It calls for the most searching cooperative and long continued effort of prophet-statesmen in the whole Society. Many yearly meetings have tried to solve it by introducing the pastoral system. That has not solved it, and probably will not solve it, though it has brought fresh life and a more effective ministry into many meetings in the areas where it prevails. And something can be learned by an impartial study of this experiment. It was a bold but radical attempt to arrest the decline which was ominously in evidence in the seventies and eighties of the last century, and to bring life into places where there was deadness. It was open to two dangers. It did not wisely enough comprehend the spiritual genius of the Quaker method of worship and the essential conditions of it. And in the second place it was an easy step for the meeting to become directed and regimented and brought into line with the order of service common to most evangelical Churches. With it came the tendency to call the meeting a “church,” to lose the distinctive aspects of the Society of Friends as a free, democratic, spiritual movement, and to treat it as one more sectarian Church, alongside the great list of Protestant denominational and creedal Churches. That did not always happen, but it has been a well-marked tendency.

What is the alternative, or, better still, the alternatives? Of course, one alternative is to go on slowly dying out. That is certain to happen if nothing is done to check the decline which over a term of years is unmistakable. I believe that much could be accomplished by carefully planned intervisitation. There are highly gifted persons in a few meetings, who ought to circulate much more than is now the case. Their absence occasionally from their own meeting would throw the sense of responsibility on other members of it, which would have a wholesome effect, and they would bring fresh life and inspiration where they visited. It is impossible for me to overestimate the importance of the visits of Friends in the ministry to our meeting in the days of my youth. It made all things new and wonderful to the little boy who could predict almost infallibly what our own members would do and say. But a new voice, a new vision, a new personality, made all the difference and woke him up to the rich meaning of his Quaker inheritance.

For the most part those visitors came on their own initiative with an inward sense of urge. It was a part of the psychological climate of the Society of Friends in those days that sooner or later, and usually sooner, every prominent Friend would be "moved" to go out on one of these far-flung visits, and the whole Society was fed and nurtured by such messengers. The times have changed, and the psychological climate has altered. It is fairly easy to explain the change, but it is not necessary to do so. The fact of the altered climate is obvious. I see no reason why it is not just as much a divine leading and just as spiritual a procedure to have the concern for a visit originate with the meeting as with the individual. If the concerned Friends of a meeting, which would usually include the Overseers and Elders, were awake to the needs of their meeting, they could invite some Friend to visit them for a weekend, or perhaps for a longer time, so

that there might be an opportunity for family visits as of old. Friends' Fellowship Council is fully alive to the significance and importance of this work of intervisitation, and it could be of much assistance in making arrangements for it.

But first of all it is essential that there shall be in each meeting an alert group of Friends who feel a profound concern for the spiritual life of the meeting. The local meeting of ministers and elders should be enlarged to include the overseers and other, weighty Friends, and they should be the Pastoral Committee of the Meeting, concerned for shepherding the flock, visiting families, encouraging Friends who minister, opening the way for Friendly visits, and for special meetings and in every possible way nurturing the youth and deepening the spiritual life of the meeting. They must endeavor to get out of old, deeply plowed ruts, static ways, and have everything done with freshness and vitality. We must get over being afraid of newness, and be ready to venture and to experiment, with what St. Paul called a constant "*renewing of the mind.*"

In larger meetings a secretary to the meeting will be a source of strength and efficiency, and, if my proposal, to be made later, for local service work should come to fruition, a secretary would be almost essential for the fuller life of the meeting, and especially for the leadership among the youth of the meeting. We are concerned in this lecture with making the local meeting a vital Quaker cell, and that means that we cannot be satisfied, as a Friend once put it, to "do our little work in our little way." We must use all the spiritual wisdom and gifts of life God has imparted to us to make that cell of life vital and creative.

George Fox gave as his test of a meeting the call to make it a power house, what today we should call a filling station. His word to Friends of his day was: "Hold all your