

Learning about Afterwords

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As soon as I started to tell people that I was going to do a research project about ‘afterwords’, supported by the Eva Koch scholarship at Woodbrooke, I began to hear strong opinions about afterwords. Quakers had almost all heard of afterwords, and they said, “Ah, we have that in our meeting,” or “I went to a meeting once where they did that.”

Then they either told me how good it was, or leaned in conspiratorially and explained that they don’t like it at all. Afterwords, I rapidly learned, is not something which Quakers in Britain agree about.

This placed me in a difficult position. I wanted to hear from people with a range of perspectives on afterwords, and people obviously wanted to tell me. My personal experience of meetings which use afterwords is limited, though, and while I have family who have opinions just as strong as everyone else’s, I’m actually in a smaller third category of people who are genuinely ambivalent about it. In a way, this was the prompt for my project. In particular, I wanted to understand better how afterwords changes the experience of attending Meeting for Worship. Does it really improve the community in a meeting, or affect the quality of spoken ministry? In order to learn more about this, I decided to use an online survey to ask people to tell me about their experiences.

In reading the survey responses, I found many people describing things I could recognise and relate to. For example, I’m familiar with the worry about time and wanting to get away from the meeting house promptly, so I can see how an afterwords which feels like a “drag of undefined time” is unwelcome. Actually, in the course of the wider research, I learned that

tea-and-biscuits time is also a relatively newfangled invention – social time seems to have appeared in the mid-20th century, while afterwords has become much more common since 2000. I often find social time awkward and emotionally difficult, so I found it easy to relate to those Friends who like afterwords because it provides a smoother transition from the depths of worship into notices and chatter which can feel shallow. Good notices arise from the life of the meeting, our spiritual perspectives moving into action, and don't have to have this effect – but I have certainly had times when I felt that the busy-ness of the community ran beyond what was guided by the Spirit, or when someone made notices sound boring by delivering them in a bored tone of voice.

As I read and re-read the responses, a handful of central themes began to emerge. Some were practical, like the issue about time I mentioned already, and issues around where afterwords is held. A meeting which holds afterwords in a separate room, or allows people to leave before afterwords, can feel fragmented by this. Those who stay might feel an increased fellowship with one another, but this doesn't have the same effect if it doesn't include the whole meeting. Another theme, though, was community, and specifically the idea that afterwords is helpful in forming the meeting into a community in which people know one another in “the things which are eternal”. Afterwords can be part of ‘making ourselves known’, a space to share recent experience which might be neither spiritual enough for ministry nor significant enough for notices. This is the main role in which Zélie Gross suggests it in *With a Tender Hand* (p338).

Besides giving more space to speak, afterwords may change who speaks: it is often meant to make the meeting more inclusive by helping everyone to feel able to speak to the whole group, even if they don't have a leading to give ministry or a need to offer a notice. Some people in the survey report that this works, saying for example that afterwords “provides a way of binding us together in our spiritual concerns”. Other people are clearly so busy worrying about the time afterwords takes, or the negative effect they feel it has on ministry, that they don't experience this positive community-building effect.

For many meetings, afterwords is clearly polarising. Some people take up positions for and others against it, leading to a division which

may or may not be visible. Even if afterwords itself is helpful to some in the meeting, this polarisation is obviously unhelpful for the meeting community as a whole. People who filled in the survey - who were mostly experienced Friends, and disproportionately likely to be in membership compared to Quakers as a whole – often didn't know why their meeting had begun using afterwords, even though few meetings reported using it before 2000. When respondents did know why they started, it was frequently described as something which someone, perhaps an elder, had seen or heard about elsewhere and liked. Only two reports, out of over 180 responses to the detailed survey, said that a local Meeting for Worship for Business had been consulted. Where the meeting has been using it for some time, this might simply be because the process has been forgotten, but it nevertheless raises questions about what the appropriate mechanism is for making changes to a meeting's practice.

Another key theme was a complex set of relationships between afterwords and ministry. Often, people introduce afterwords to encourage good spoken ministry in meeting for worship. The survey responses included some first-hand accounts from people for whom this had worked: they spoke in afterwords first and, as they gained confidence and became clearer in their faith, they began to give ministry in worship as well. One person said that afterwords “provided a way of 'testing' whether the contribution that I could make was really ministry”. For meetings where there is little vocal ministry, or where several people who might contribute are held back by shyness, this obviously has the potential to be a positive effect.

However, there is also the danger that introducing afterwords encourages people to save something they might have offered in ministry and say it during afterwords, taking good ministry out of meeting. This was also commonly reported in the survey - some meetings even find that having introduced afterwords, their worship becomes completely silent, with no spoken ministry at all. Although a few people, especially those who have recent experience of inappropriate ministry, feel that this is an improvement, it is usually reported as a loss or a misunderstanding about the nature of Quaker worship. One respondent said that afterwords “makes silence into an end in itself” rather than helping us to use silence as a way to be in communion, while another said directly that “When

something is bubbling you are let off the hook of testing whether it is ministry as you think you'll just drop it into Afterwords.” For those who are relatively new to the Quaker way and trying to learn how to give ministry, attending a meeting where there is no spoken ministry, only afterwords, must be like trying to learn how to knit from someone who can only crochet. You might get the general idea of making fabric from loops of yarn, but the actual technique will be elusive.

The positive side of the movement of contributions out of ministry and into afterwords is that it can help to prevent or manage inappropriate ministry. There's still a need to let the Friend whose ministry is inappropriate know that afterwords would be a better place for it, but a large number of survey respondents told me that this was one of the key roles of afterwords in their meeting: it helps them cope with “a member who always needs to contribute verbally”, it “managed those who ministered on a hairtrigger”, or that it was brought in because “we had a couple of friends who would regularly minister on the same political subject”. These are relatively sympathetic portrayals of the Friend who speaks too often, and other survey responses described meetings where afterwords had been discontinued because it was “hijacked' by one or two members of the meeting who very often rode their hobbyhorses”, or the problems which arise when “people who have a tendency to talk a lot and repeat themselves make a sort of field day of it”. I certainly recognise the picture, having known Friends like this (and being prone to be one myself).

The overall impression I got from the survey was that it may be better to have these Friends speak during afterwords than during meeting, but at the same time it might be better if they could be taught not to speak in problematic ways at all. “Waffle”, “rambling” and “judgemental even arrogant” contributions all came in for negative comment, and afterwords is as likely to be stopped because of these contributions as started to contain them. A similar problem was reported in cases where afterwords became a discussion, with people responding directly to one another - although in some meetings where afterwords was held alongside the social time, often in a different room, discussion could be welcome or even encouraged.

The problem of Friends who contribute inappropriately, even with the lower bar set on afterwords, relates to the need which some

respondents felt for afterwords to be properly controlled. “Elders,” said one person, “keep careful watch to ensure that afterwords don't become indisciplined.” It was also felt in the emphasis people placed on introducing afterwords correctly - a lot of respondents gave me, with at least an impression of exactness, the words used to introduce afterwords in their meeting. A typical example has an elder introduce the time by saying, after the handshake, “we now continue in the spirit of worship with afterwords, which is a time when we can share any insights which occurred to us either in Meeting or in the week before. When we have finished afterwords we will have notices, then coffee”. Others use phrases such as ‘not quite ministry’ or ‘nearly ministry’, referring back to the issue of the relationship between ministry and afterwords. Alongside many respondents who feel that discipline is important for a good afterwords, there are also a few who feel that it has gone too far the other way, and call their local meeting's afterwords “rather too programmed” or say that they “find the rigid structure rather restrictive”. Since the relative informality of afterwords - that people can contribute without the strict testing they would give to ministry - is a central feature of it for many purposes, this is something which elders and others using afterwords need to watch for carefully.

As I take the results of this research out into the community of Friends, the biggest thing I am taking away from it is the ongoing need for us to learn about our practices and understand why we do things the way we do them. Afterwords might be a practice pool for those who are uncertain about swimming in the open sea of worship - happy to float, perhaps, but not sure if they will be getting somewhere if they offer ministry. It won't replace swimming lessons, though, because the conditions are very different. What can we offer by way of clearer opportunities for people to explicitly explore the guidelines on our practice, understanding why some contributions are not true ministry rather than guessing from their observations? Books can be helpful, but a book on swimming cannot replace the feeling of the water upholding you and the tides of the Spirit pulling you. A well-held teaching space, in which people who have the skills involved both demonstrate and discuss their techniques and experience, is more likely to be useful.

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