



*Quaker Universalist Voice*  
**Friendly Faith and  
Practice Study**  
by Joanne and Larry Spears

THE FAITH AND PRACTICE AND BOOK OF DISCIPLINE:  
A STUDY METHOD CONSISTENT WITH THE TESTIMONIES OF  
THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)

**Comments By Participants in One Meeting's Faith and Practice Study:**

"This study method helps me to root my own journey in the experience of others."

"It helps me understand what Quakerism is and understand the ways and practices of Quakerism."

"It helps me make a connection of the past with today."

"We can express ideas without needing to defend them."

"There has to be an interplay between Faith and Practice (Book of Discipline) and the knowledge and experience we bring to it."

"We can and do differ on faith issues and still be comfortable talking and listening in the group."

"The study has given me a much greater respect for, and confidence in, my own understanding than I have ever had before."

"The study depends on each one listening openly and speaking openly."

# Friendly Faith and Practice Study

## **The Gift of Faith and Practice:**

In the silence of Quaker worship, Friends experience a presence together. But, Friends in meetings bind themselves together with more than silence. There is a rich Quaker tradition of growing in faith, sharing faith experience, and acting in ways consistent with these experiences. What is this faith? How do we put it into practice?

When these questions began to emerge for seventeenth century Quakers, leaders began to draft a set of advices and regulations for monthly meeting order and guidance for the lives of Friends. These writings formed the basis for the Book of Discipline of London Yearly Meeting and for all later books of discipline. As Friends established yearly meetings in America, each prepared its own Book of Discipline. For a period, there was much similarity because Quaker meetings linked themselves to London Yearly Meeting and its dominant tradition. As communities of Friends in the yearly meetings developed independent experience, the Faith and Practice documents began to take on greater variety.

Part of the process in formulating a Book of Discipline or Faith and Practice is to gather selections from the minutes of the yearly meetings into book form. As needs arise, we make additions and deletions and periodically republish the book. These changes show how Quaker faith and sensitivities to problems in individual lives and society evolve and change in continuing revelation within the Quaker communities.

Faith and Practice is a guide to right living and a manual of meeting government. With it, Quaker communities have produced a new type of declaration of faith. That declaration of faith is an anthology of religious experience and the structure of the evolving life of a faith community. It contrasts sharply in stature, structure, and use with the credal model of other traditions.

In that way, the chosen Faith and Practice makes an enduring contribution of Quakerism, to religion, and to our Protestant-Catholic-Jewish-Primordial spiritual heritage in particular. Faith and Practice reflects the collective experience of Friends through time and witnesses to the core of the faith community.

Spiritual and theological concerns shift in importance among Friends of different experience. Among Friends today there is a wide range of views of Faith and Practice, from those who know little about this spiritual resource, to those who see it as an interesting historical document, to those who see it as an authoritative source of understanding and strength on their spiritual journeys.

### **Purpose and Goals of the Friendly Faith and Practice Study Method:**

Today, there is a renewed recognition of the need to establish roots and acknowledge a foundation of the spiritual tradition. In increasing numbers, Friends desire to study Faith and Practice. Many Friends recognize Faith and Practice as an essential source of spiritual authority in their lives. Many who are struggling with life and religion need the support and direction provided by a candid group study method that reflects Quaker values and tradition.

The chosen Faith and Practice reflects Quaker spirituality as one particular way of bringing faith to life. It is one practical, spiritual understanding of the human interaction with God.

Some use Faith and Practice for private reflection. Some meetings continue the tradition of reading from Faith and Practice as part of Meeting for Worship for Business. Group study of the testimonies of past Friends in Faith and Practice provides an additional opportunity for engagement with that tradition.

To enter and develop this spiritual understanding, we encourage Friends to read in Faith and Practice daily, as a guide to the spiritual life and faith of their meeting and to their own lives. Continued private use and meeting use of Faith and Practice is essential to the integrity of the common spiritual life within a Quaker meeting or church. We encourage Friends to use the study method outlined here as an additional way to read and study Faith and Practice.

This study method will provide a disciplined and exciting process for studying one of the basic resources of the community of faith. We do not intend this study method primarily to create knowledge about the contents of the book. Its purpose is to promote a friendly conversation, using a process closer to worship sharing than discussion. Its use can bring Friends into closer community. The method will support and strengthen individual spiritual life, the Society of Friends, and the spiritual life of any community.

This study method is one way for anyone to make connections with the Quaker tradition. It is available equally to those new to the Quaker tradition and for those Friends who seek to renew their acquaintance with Faith and Practice in their spiritual community.

This study method is also one way for anyone interested in faith development to make connections with the Quaker tradition and the faith and practice of Friends. This study of Faith and Practice provides a process for reflecting on the meaning that the Quaker spiritual tradition offers for our lives today. The method promotes a friendly conversation about the deepest truths in our lives from a shared experience and tradition.

Friends may use the study method with the Faith and Practice of any yearly meeting. We offer this study method for the study of all parts of Faith and Practice. The purpose of this study method is to help Friends and seekers of truth study testimonies of faith, reflect on the faith and practice of the people presently calling themselves Quakers, and deepen the spiritual life of individuals and meetings. This method offers a process for Friends to study these statements. It proceeds in a manner consistent with those testimonies.

### **Friendly Faith and Practice Study Method:**

This study method reflects and supports important aspects of Quaker insights, understanding, and standards because it:

- \* recognizes personal experience as a central part of our spiritual lives;
  - \* affirms the connection of the testimonies of past Quaker writings to our present condition;
  - \* recognizes the equality of all participants in the study process;
  - \* affirms that of God in all of the participants;
  - \* recognizes the possibility of continuing revelation in our spiritual lives;
- and
- \* affirms the continuing nature of our spiritual journeys within a community of faith.

This study method offers a process for Friends to study Faith and Practice in a manner consistent with Quaker testimonies. This approach to group study arose out of experience with a comparable Friendly Bible Study method. That experience with group Bible study created a desire to apply this experience of Friends in a group process with the Faith and Practice. It grew out of experimental learning in monthly meetings and regional and national gatherings of Friends.

This simple-to-use method provides a structure for effective communication. It is a tool that enables people to initiate and participate in a productive exploration of Faith and Practice for their lives. This study method assures that each person participates throughout the discussion. The questions provide a structure for thinking and a basis for each person to share insights.

Effort and practice are necessary to benefit from any Faith and Practice study method. Friends find that deep sharing grows out of regular and consistent use of this study method. We suggest that this study format be used as described before trying variations. The purposes are described and should be reviewed periodically.

### **Nine Steps to a Faith and Practice Study Group:**

You can start a study group by following these specific steps:

1. Gather a group that can commit one hour a week for six weeks.
2. Select a section of Faith and Practice.
3. Study only a single entry each week.
4. Review the questions.
5. Read the passage aloud.
6. Start in silence.
7. Write the answers to the questions.
8. Share the answers orally around the circle.
9. End in silence.

### **Step 1: Gather a group that can commit one hour a week for six weeks.**

Gather at least three, but not more than eight, interested people from any backgrounds. Each person participates fully and equally, without any requirement of prior familiarity or study of Faith and Practice. A person with extensive Quaker background can be helpful, but should not be treated as an authority figure. A group reflecting a diversity of viewpoints and backgrounds broadens the shared spiritual experience and stimulates understanding.

Ask each person to commit one hour a week for six consecutive weeks. The study should begin when everyone in the group can make a commitment to attend all six of the study sessions. Choose a starting date that will permit the group to continue without interruption.

Each session should last one hour. Starting promptly assures finishing in one hour.

Ask each person to obtain a copy of a commonly chosen Faith and Practice. Ask that each person bring only Faith and Practice, a notebook and a bookmark (See the bookmark attachment) with the six study questions. The notebook is useful as a study journal, available for future reference. All writings are private, except as members choose to share their contents with the group. There is no expectation that participants do outside reading prior to the meetings.

Members may search out the context of a particular passage, or seek solutions to particular problems identified in the study. You may consult other reference books after the study, but, during the group study, these reference books distract the participants from the focus on the Faith and Practice. Before the next study session begins, they may report back briefly.

### **Step 2: Select a section of Faith and Practice.**

At the beginning of the first meeting, start the study with a section of the Faith and Practice that addresses the experience of Friends. This passage will begin the study for the six-week commitment. While any section can be a good starting point, it is our experience that this method works most successfully by beginning with that portion that addresses the spiritual foundation of the Faith and Practice.

For example, choose the Faith and Practice or Discipline document of your yearly meeting or start with Chapter 1 of *Christian Faith and Practice: the experience of the society of friends* (London Yearly Meeting, 1960) or Chapter III of *Discipline: Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends* (Conservative, 1974), or the "Religious Experience" section of the *Book of Discipline of the Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting Religious Society of Friends: A Guide to Christian Faith and Practice* (Revised, 1978), or the Richmond Declaration section of *Faith and Practice of Indiana Yearly Meeting* (Friends United Meeting, 1976), or the Testimonies section of *Faith and Practice of Mid-America Yearly Meeting* (Evangelical Friends International, 1988). These can be your starting points.

### **Step 3: Study only a single entry each week.**

Choose the starting entry in a section, to be followed each week by the next entry. As the study continues through the weeks, themes will emerge that link the current session to discussions in previous sessions. Don't try to cover more than one entry during one session.

It is essential to take only a single entry for each Faith and Practice study session. At first glance, there does not seem to be very much to discuss in just a few lines. Resist the temptation to hurry the assigned task in the shortest possible time. Respectful focusing on a small section leads to deeper insights.

It is tempting to be selective among passages. Don't. It is important to hold each other accountable to the text of the tradition. Our experience has been that the most helpful discussions are those based on passages that none of us would have chosen!

This method reflects the view that great insight is available when focusing on small amounts of study material. However, being sensitive to the occasions when the text is not consistent with a participant's experience may indicate that the passage should be read in the larger context of the historical situation in which it was written. Remember that each paragraph or section is part of a larger work and does not necessarily give the true flavor or reflect the major themes of the whole work. The complete books or articles are listed at the back of the Faith and Practice for further reading.

### **Step 4: Review the questions.**

At the beginning of the first session, each person should write down the six questions on an index card, a separate sheet of paper, or the first page of the notebook. A bookmark, like that at the end of this booklet, can be reproduced and used to remind participants of the study questions.

Make notes in response to each question during the silent period each time you meet (see Step 7). In the first session, and to a lesser degree in those following, discuss these questions to make sure that everyone understands the purpose of each question.

### **Friendly Faith and Practice Study Questions:**

The six study questions are simple, easily remembered, and consistent with the testimonies of Friends:

1. What is the core issue in this passage? (**Core**)
2. What new light do I have in reading this passage at this time? (**New Light**)
3. How is this passage true to my experience and to our experience as a meeting? (**Experience**)
4. How does this passage agree with, or differ from, the beliefs and practices of other religious groups in my experience? (**Others**)
5. What are the implications of this passage for my life and for our meeting? (**Implications**)

6. What problems are there with this passage for my life and for the life of our meeting? (**Problems**)

Eventually, participants will need to write down, as a reminder, only an abbreviation ("Core," for example). After two or three weeks, they will easily remember the questions. Participants may need to remind themselves occasionally of the purpose of each question.

### **Comments About the Study Questions:**

Each question contributes to the study. Each question focuses attention on a complementary way of looking at the passage. The following comments provide background for each question:

#### **Question 1. What is the core issue in this passage? (Core)**

This first question helps each member focus on what the author is saying. Each person addresses the text directly. What is the author's main point? Over time, the group forms a significant, understanding relationship with Quakers throughout history.

It is essential to listen carefully for the author's core issue in each passage as a place to start hearing and understanding the Spirit of God in that testimony or experience.

The search here is for the main point the author is making in this passage and the author's understanding of God working in the world and history. Try to state the author's main point, rather than make a summary of the passage. This is not the time to share the ideas of another author, professor, or other authority figure. It is easy to answer this question with what we would like the author to have said or with our own ideas on the subject. However, focus attention on the core of what the author actually said.

Many people authored the selections in Faith and Practice. They speak out of different expressions, in different centuries, and articulate their faith and experience in different vocabularies and different ways. Together, they reflect the living tradition of Quakers.

To help those who may be unsure or timid, remind participants that a variety of responses can help the group see the whole of the passage more clearly. After one or two sessions, everyone will understand, and most participants will find the study liberating for understanding.

#### **Question 2. What new light do I have in reading this passage at this time? (New Light)**

The purpose here is to identify each person's new insights, new observations, or new understanding in reading the passage on this particular occasion.

This question enables the Spirit to work in our silence. Revelation continues in our lives and it comes from both the unfamiliar and the familiar.

The emphasis on the newness found in this occasion affirms the equality of all participants. Each member's new insight, observation, or understanding during this particular reading is of value. The question draws attention to the new light within this occasion. This moment is the occasion for regular affirmation of the reality of the Spirit of God that rises in the community of seekers.

All participants may not have seen this passage before in exactly this way. It may be small or great. It may concern a word or phrase. The new light may offer a new way to see a particular problem. This question is often the last one considered in the silence. Suddenly, participants may offer new ideas as they share their understanding through the other questions.

**Question 3. How is this passage true to my experience and to our experience as a meeting? (Experience)**

Each person is on a spiritual journey. Each meeting is also on a community spiritual journey. Each passage from the experience of past Friends can speak both to our present condition and to the condition of the meeting. An alternative way to pose Question 3 may be, "How does this passage speak to my spiritual journey and the spiritual journey of our meeting?"

As Quakers, our spiritual journeys are always being checked and refined. Our personal and community experiences are sources of authority that we bring to our study of the texts of our tradition. In this question, the purpose is to compare the message of the passage of Faith and Practice with our experience.

For those who come from other religious traditions, this question may seem shocking. For many, our backgrounds do not allow us to question the "truth" of the texts of the tradition. Comparison of testimonies of the past with present personal experience may be unfamiliar, but welcome. This question often empowers members and consistently opens up new insights for everyone in the group.

When we realize that our present understanding of the passage is not consistent with our experience, we can reassess our experience. Then, we study the passage more deeply, or admit that our individual spiritual journeys, like those of the authors, take place in a darkness. Light may never fully penetrate that darkness.

**Question 4. How does this passage agree with, or differ from, the beliefs and practices of other religious groups in my experience? (Others)**

This question is important because it directs attention to the distinctiveness as well as to the commonness of Quaker understanding with that of other religious groups. Reference to other groups may include

more than Christian groups. Discussion should extend as wide as the experiences of the study group allow.

This question helps participants to sort through their past religious experiences and present spiritual conditions. It encourages understanding of both similarities and differences among other religious traditions, while we also become more tender to the singularity of Friends. Seeing these differences and similarities helps us to clarify our understanding.

**Question 5. What are the implications of this passage for my life and for our meeting? (Implications)**

The answer to this question may touch several levels of our spiritual lives. The center of the question is, "What difference, if any, does the passage make for my life?" It invites the text to reach into our lives. What difference, if any, does this passage make for the way I live my life and for the life of the meeting? Does it connect our lives in a meeting?

Central to our tradition is the way we integrate our faith with our daily ethical practice. What are the implications for what I believe? What are the implications for what I do and what I believe? What are the implications for how we act and believe as a meeting?

**Question 6. What problems are there with this passage for my life and for the life of our meeting? (Problems)**

Here we identify any problems with the language, interpretation, meaning, or application of the text. We can identify problems here without offering a solution. A solution may come in a passage in a later study or it may never come.

The study method recognizes that no single reading of Faith and Practice is enough to bring full understanding. Identified problems may generate interest in seeking information from other sources outside the study or support reflection during the week.

This question reminds us that studying the tradition of Friends' spiritual journeys is a continuing process. Like life, at no one time is our understanding complete. With this question, the dialogue between text and life continues.

**Step 5: Read the passage aloud.**

After making certain that each person understands each question, start your study. The one who convenes the study asks one person to read aloud the selected passage slowly. Listen to the words. All members should follow the text in their copy of the Faith and Practice. This reading will often stimulate thinking and insight, particularly if the passage initially seems difficult or without significance.

**Step 6: Start in silence.**

The group gathers into silence. Following the reading of the passage for study, take time to settle into the stillpoint together, and linger there. Hold each person in the Light. When ready, each participant can start the silent reading of the passage and answering of the questions.

The practice of silence may be new to some. The duration remains a matter for individual reflection, but the practice of silence binds the group together in its study.

After a few minutes of quiet, individuals begin, at their own initiative and pace, to reread the passage silently and to write notes for each question in the notebook. Working in the silence, each person centers, then rereads and writes when ready.

Each person answers the questions from their own background and experience. Assure everyone that no single comment needs to capture the whole significance of any passage. The Faith and Practice study process is similar to the inspection of the elephant by a committee of blind people. One person describes a tail, one a trunk, one an ear, one a leg, and one a side. Each brings a separate experience and perception of the same subject. This method enables each person to contribute their particular experience and perceptions. Each person's view is important to the whole. The unique way that each person expresses their view can provide new insights for others.

**Step 7: Write the answers to the questions.**

Encourage each person to write something in response to each question. These notes need not be full sentences or paragraphs. Write what is necessary to capture the insight and to hold it for sharing with the group.

Participants may make notes about the passage in any order, as the ideas occur during the silence. However, it is helpful to begin thinking about the core issue first. Then, other thoughts come to mind in their own sequence.

**Step 8: Share the answers orally around the circle.**

After 5 or 10 minutes, when everyone seems to have finished writing their responses to the questions, the one who convenes the meeting reminds participants about the procedure for sharing. Follow the order of the questions on the bookmark.

One volunteer begins the answer cycle. In turn, around the circle, each person reads aloud or paraphrases their responses to the first question. After each one has had the opportunity to answer this first question, pause for a moment of silence. Then, continue around the circle again to share the responses to the second question and so on, until everyone has answered each question in turn.

Clear hearing of the insights of each person is important. No extensive discussion should occur during this time. Encourage only short comments or

requests to clarify a particular answer in this part of the process. After answering all of the questions, discussion develops for the time remaining.

At all times, in all groups, preserve the movement around the circle. Everyone should have the opportunity and time to speak to every question in turn, enabling the group wisdom and insights to build. The one-hour limit to which members agreed is a helpful discipline to guide the allocation of time for each answer.

Remind everyone that all answers are acceptable and helpful. Encourage each person to share something for every question. If, after consideration, there seems to be nothing to share, or if one chooses not to share a personal response, a pass is always acceptable. Sometimes, even a tentative response seems impossible. No one should feel pressured to answer. Remember that something that seems obvious or trivial to one person can be a wonderful new insight to another.

The only leadership needed for the sharing process is a person who senses when it is time to begin the oral sharing and maintains the movement of sharing around the circle, which must be fast enough to keep to the agreed one-hour time limit, but slow enough for understanding each contribution. Everyone must feel confident that the study will not take a whole morning, afternoon, or evening -- one hour only.

With experience, insights and understanding grow. When others share their thoughts, people who have no particular insights will find a passage opening to them. After the discussion, new insights may occur that far exceed the sum of the initial individual insights. An apparently superficial comment can create great openings for others in the group.

### **Step 9: End in silence.**

End the study with a short period of silence in which to reflect on the passage, the responses, and the discussion. Hold each person in the Light of God.

### **Individual and Meeting:**

Questions 3, 5, and 6 include references to individuals and to meeting. If time permits, it may be possible for each person to answer both parts of each question. There is always an option for each person to respond to only one part.

Participants speak out of their experience in their lives and in their experience of the meeting. Since they have much common experience of the meeting, there is occasion here for stating a fuller expression and identifying the core of their common experience of the meeting.

Often there may not be enough time to think about all aspects of the passage. Each participant may choose the personal or the corporate dimension. The group will usually find a balance in the shared perspectives and answers. Responses to both parts of each question help the group understand the communal and the individual functions of the passage.

### **Six-Week Assessment:**

At the end of the six weeks, each person must decide to continue or discontinue Faith and Practice study. It has been our experience that after six weeks, with every member participating every week, most people find the study so spiritually helpful that they want to continue.

In the use of the study method with Faith and Practice, each study group may wish to choose one of the following approaches to selecting the passages for study:

- a. Study the first six passages in each section, and then study the same number of passages in each subsequent section; or
- b. Study one full section before going to the next section.

When the group decides to continue, they should always meet regularly, even if some members cannot attend a particular session.

### **Conclusion:**

People today are seeking to renew their roots in the tradition of Friends. This study method for Faith and Practice is consistent with the testimonies of the Quaker spiritual tradition. Many Friends have found this to be an extraordinary method to study Faith and Practice, one that has renewed lives and deepened the fellowship in the meeting.

### **Afterword:**

You are welcome to reproduce this material. We appreciate clear attribution to this source document and to Quaker Universalist Fellowship at [universalistfriends.org](http://universalistfriends.org).

For further information about this study method, contact:

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The Religious Education Committee of Friends General Conference proposed and encouraged the development of this study method. The companion study for the methods Friendly Bible Study and Friendly Universal Scripture study are also available from Quaker Universalist Fellowship at [universalistfriends.org](http://universalistfriends.org)

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The comparable study methods *Friendly Bible Study* and the *Friendly Universal Scripture Study* are also available from Quaker Universalist Fellowship at [universalistfriends.org](http://universalistfriends.org)

**Further Comments By Participants in One Meeting's Study and Conversations with the Testimonies of Friends in Faith and Practice:**

“Everyone sees the passage differently.”

“This study validates doubt as a part of the faith journey. The journey gets deeper and fuller.”

“It helps to pass on our cultural identity as Quakers.”

“This process helps me define my thinking and the thinking of the meeting.”

“It roots my personal experience in my tradition.”

“It gives me confidence in my ability to understand.”

“My ideas are not sufficient for complete understanding. I need others to make the ideas complete.”

“It deepens the fellowship in our meeting.”

*Friendly Faith and Practice Study Bookmarks*

**Friendly Faith and Practice Study:**

1. What is the **core** issue in this passage? (**Core**)
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6. What **problems** are there with this passage for my life and for the life of our meeting? (**Problems**)

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