



Testimonies to the grace of God in lives - an enduring presence

The advice in the current Quaker Faith and Practice at paragraph [4.24](#) that "*a testimony should not be a formal obituary or eulogy, but should record in thankfulness the power of divine grace in human life*" is not always easy to carry through.

The following paragraph, [4.25](#), a Minute from the then Hertford Monthly Meeting of 1780 records " the purpose of a testimony concerning our deceased worthy Friends (is) intended as a memorial, that they have walked as children of the Light, and of the Day, and to excite those who remain to take diligent heed, and to yield to the teachings of the still small voice, that they may follow them as they followed Christ, the great captain of their salvation". Much of this expresses Friends' interest in the writing of testimonies today, but how is it carried out?

Historically in Britain the issue of records concerning deceased Friends in the Ministry began in the 17th century. "*An early record maintained by London YM is now lost but a series of volumes begun in 1740 were maintained until 1872 with retrospective entries copied up from 1719. These volumes are known as Testimonies concerning Ministers deceased. From the 19th century (they) contain minutes from Quarterly Meetings recording the lives of Friends rather than Ministers. From 1861 Quarterly Meetings were at liberty to prepare a testimony concerning any Friend 'whose life was marked by conspicuous service to God and the church'*". (text typed up in Friends' House library subject files c.1970)

An early American testimony written around 1690 advises "*it is a justice due to the righteous, and a duty upon us, to contribute something to perpetuate the names of such who have left a fragrancy behind them, and through faith have obtained a good report*" (Samuel Jennings's testimony concerning John Eckley of Philadelphia.)

Coming forward to the 20th century London Yearly Meeting Church Government of 1931, in use for more than three decades, stated "*A Monthly*

Meeting may issue a testimony concerning the life and service of a deceased member whose life has been marked by devotion to the cause of his Lord and to the service of the Church. The object of such a Testimony is not eulogy, but to preserve a record of Divine Grace in the lives of (wo)men". This last sentence bears a close similarity to para 4.24 in the current QF&P. The text goes on to refer to progression of a testimony to YM "*only if it is likely to be of service to the Society*". This is in line with our current practice.

In today's fast moving world Friends face a double challenge, to concentrate on the Divine, and to write a short but rounded record. The first is not easy as it necessarily relates to our temporal experience; the second increasingly important if posterity is to hold learning from an inspiring text in an age of complexities, speed and an increasing multiplicity of knowledge and communication. Friends can be long-winded. This puts some off from joining in our Business Meetings for Worship.

A testimony should radiate the Grace of God as shown in the life of the Friend who has passed from this world. It differs from an obituary account of achievements, yet a few milestones in the life of the deceased will serve to illuminate the spiritual gifts bestowed.

Date of birth, date(s) of marriage(s), and date of death describe the setting of time. This is a necessary aid to living Friends. It is also a recognition of the times in which the life is set for posterity, where future Friends can relate the spiritual gifts received to the cultural context of the era. Reference to immediate antecedents can anchor the recall of a name for more distant Friends. Reference to children can demonstrate the enrichment of life. Recognition of a spiritually lived life and its application characterises the preparation of a Testimony. Worship through quiet waiting upon God prayerfully alone or where two or three are gathered together in Meeting is the hallmark of a Quaker. This does not deny the devotional or biblical emphases in other traditions. As seekers after Truth, Friends should be open to new learning as God's revelation continues in the world.

It is against this background that the application of talents whether within the life of the Society or in witness in the wider world are described. There is a temptation to link these to a career pattern or an extended voluntary body commitment, and hence border on an obituary. Rather, it is the spiritually inspired application of the talent for good that matters. Examples of the flowering of each talent in the life pattern of the departed Friend can then be quoted. If carefully knit together these convey an image of the whole.

Writing a testimony to the life of a departed Friend may not be easy. How far do we understand the familial and cultural background, the stresses and successes in that life? Did the light shine forth in life? Where we see glimpses of the inner spiritual life, how do these reflect in outward activity?

Were outward concerns truly a reflection of inward Grace? How does economic comfort sit easily with God's Will? Then we come back to what to include, what to leave out and how to outwardly reflect a spiritually inspired life to future generations.

Not far distant may be the expectations of relatives of the deceased. When a close relative died I had anticipated a prepared obituary in *The Friend* but instead I read a note from one who had only known her in her last years. I know a Friend now who feels hurt that no testimony was written around her partner who died some years ago. On another occasion a Friend who was to die shortly afterwards made plain that he did not want a testimony written to his life. It is difficult to know the aspirations of family members, and particularly so when anxiety and grief intrude. With a little passage of time, such aspirations if known, should not cloud the consideration within Monthly Meeting of how appropriately to remember a Friend. Such an interlude of perhaps a few months may help the Meeting also in its discernment as to whether to prepare a Testimony to the Grace of God in a life. It is the Light shining in Life that matters.

That Meetings might hold a short record of the lives of members is commendable. That these should be developed into Testimonies is not necessarily the right use of time for the living. It is difficult to distinguish between the Martha and the Mary, and neither should we judge. Meetings need prayerful thought before committing the strengths of a life to a Quaker Testimony.

John Melling

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As endorsed by General Meeting for Scotland by its minute 15 of 11 September 2004.

Approved by Meeting for Sufferings by minute 6 of 2 December 2006 as follows:

At a Meeting for Sufferings held in London 2 December 2006

Minute 6: Proposed Amendment to *Quaker faith & practice*

We have before us a proposed amendment to *Quaker faith & practice*, as detailed in Minute 05/33 of Church Government Advisory Group held 9 November 2005 (paper S 06/12/ Di-ii). Minute MSC 06/94 of Meeting for Sufferings Committee held 7 September 2006, and the process for amendments to *Quaker faith & practice* agreed by Yearly Meeting 2006, also refer.

The amendment is to insert the following text within section 4.26 (line 7 from the top of the page, between “advice” and “The testimony”):

“Meetings deciding to prepare a testimony, and particularly those Friends doing the drafting, are encouraged to consult the advice in the paper Testimonies to the grace of God in lives – an enduring presence, available from the Recording Clerk.”

We agree to this text, and forward it to Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee for consideration by Yearly Meeting 2007. We unite with Church Government Advisory Group and Meeting for Sufferings Committee in hoping that the *Testimonies* paper will bear the attribution to General Meeting for Scotland

when available from the Recording Clerk with the authority of Britain Yearly Meeting.
Rachel Carmichael
Clerk

Copies of this paper may be obtained from the Recording Clerk's Office, Friends House, 173 Euston Road, London NW1 2BJ. 020 7663 1141 or from suzel@quaker.org.uk.