

Group Conversation, Quaker Dialogue and Worship Sharing: Evolving Statements of Purpose and Goals of Small Group Conversation

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*This is a collection of statements I have run across that attempt to express in a nutshell the purpose or goals of one kind of group conversation or another. They are arranged chronologically by date of the publication I found them in. **Bolding** is mine.*

*The list starts with statements by Rachel Davis DuBois (1892-1993), spanning her pioneering work in intercultural education, for which she coined various terms including Group Conversation, to her later adaptations for Friends, for which she coined the term Quaker Dialogue. Later statements focus on what Friends call worship sharing (or worship fellowship) groups, especially statements from within Pacific Yearly Meeting. This is meant to **illustrate the evolution (and continuing evolution) of Friends' understanding** of what such small group dialogues or conversations might **"accomplish" (goals)** and different **"reasons" (purposes)** for conducting them.*

There is no "right answer" or single purpose why small groups should get together for conversation or what they should accomplish. Friends are always free to build on what has gone before in order to meet present needs. But we are wise to at least know something about what has gone before. Much experience has gone into these statements.

I tend to think of the "purposes" or "goals" expressed below in terms of the following categories. You may find additional categories useful, or not think in terms of categories at all.

- *Interracial and intercultural understanding, reducing tensions (Rachel DuBois' starting point)*
- *Fellowship, sense of trust and community*
- *Spiritual renewal, revitalization (individual and/or meeting)*
- *Self-awareness, introspection*
- *Confession – a chance to speak the unspeakable*
- *Consideration of a specific difficult topic or problem*

1. Rachel DuBois, 1943, "Get Together Americans"
 - "People do not act according to what they know but according to how they feel about what they know. The Neighborhood-Home Festival is one means of **changing feelings of antagonism and suspicion into feelings of appreciation and friendliness among members of the various racial, cultural, and religious groups** found in the average American community."
2. Rachel DuBois, 1945, "Workshop for Cultural Democracy" (as quoted in George A. Crispin Ph.D. dissertation, 1987)
 - "The Workshop for Cultural Democracy [established in 1941] is a non-profit, tax-exempt corporation set up to develop, try out, and crystallize into **easily used and teachable social techniques** the kinds of groups activity which **get at the roots of social prejudice and remove them in a thoroughly satisfying social experience specifically designed for mixed crowds, and most exhilarating where the crowd is most mixed**. It devises types of conversation which make getting acquainted across barriers of race, creed, color, or social status or barriers merely of stubborn prejudice, **a drama of mutual discovery**. It plays on the obvious fact that **the person who is most different** from those present, and therefore, in the provincial party setup is most likely to be snubbed, **is potentially the most interesting as a dramatic character**."
3. Rachel DuBois and Mew-soong Li, 1955, "Group Conversation"
 - "Designed to take place in **an atmosphere of congenial spontaneity**, group conversation involves a **reaching into our backgrounds for memorable experiences**, many below the level of verbalization, **which, when shared around a universal theme, help us to sense our common humanity**."
4. Rachel DuBois, 1959, Friends Journal, Sept 26, 1959, ran a notice describing Rachel's recent work:
 - "Specifically, the '**Quaker Dialogue**,' as this new kind of ministry has now been named, **is directed towards helping small groups of Friends share informally their ideas and concerns on the nature and role of the unprogrammed meeting for worship, the business meeting, and outreach**. Generally speaking, the aim was to help individuals to **become more inwardly aware of the religious process in themselves, to sense what steps to take to stimulate spiritual growth**, and in so doing to **attain a greater sense of the inner harmony needed** for counteracting the strains of today."
5. Rachel DuBois, 1960-74, "A Handbook for Leaders of Quaker Dialogues", 1960, revised 1964 and 1974.
 - "Quaker Dialogue is directed towards helping groups of Friends ... to **share informally their ideas and concerns on three topics**:
 - i. The nature and role of the **meeting for worship**,
 - ii. The nature and role of the **business meeting**,
 - iii. The nature and role of **Quaker outreach** in the world around us."
 - "Generally speaking, the aim of the Quaker Dialogue is to help individuals to become **more aware of the religious process in themselves, to sense what steps to take to stimulate spiritual growth**, and in so doing to **attain a greater sense of the inner harmony and strength** needed to counteract the strains of today and to **release more creative energy** in working for God's kingdom. Usually the Dialogue brings members

and attenders of a Meeting to a **deeper understanding of each other** and to a **new awareness of spiritual realities.**"

6. Rachel DuBois, 1963, "Quaker Dialoguing", Friends Journal, April 15, 1963
 - "How can we **develop the kind of interthinking, interloving life Tom Kelly pointed to in his *Reality of the Spiritual World?***"
7. Claremont Meeting, 1963, "A Meeting's Creative Experience", Friends Journal, July 15, 1963
 - "The nine of us on Ministry and Counsel [met in extra sessions **to**] **consider only this problem: how to raise the level of spirit in our meeting for worship.** ... We met one evening a week for six weeks to ask ourselves a question and to answer that question one member at a time. We **took from our experience with Rachel DuBois** three years ago and from her pamphlet, *A Handbook for Leaders of Quaker Dialogues*, the idea that Friends in their discussions need to **raise the level of feeling and lower the intellectual emphasis.**"
 - "In our Quaker society, where we do not have the drama of sacramental rites nor the unity of a common creed, this **at-home-ness in the group, this one-ness with people of different backgrounds, occupations, and theologies**, is a precious gift. As we listened in loving acceptance to the unfolding of such **very different lives**, and ourselves experienced in imagination **the sadness, the struggle, the occasional triumph** that was being shared, we knew **a unity that was deeper than words** and experienced a **true sense of Presence.**"
8. Margaret S. Gibbins, 1969, "Encounter Through Worship-Sharing", Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)
 - *This pamphlet grew out of Margaret Gibbins' experience at the World Conference of Friends, probably a 1967 gathering. It begins by harkening to world's cries and the call Friends feel to become more involved, particularly as regards to hunger, war and racial conflict.*
 - "[The] evolving upholding power released in true worship-sharing can **free us as individuals to mature into the kind of people who are more fitted to respond to the situations in today's world**, a world which includes **our near and far neighbor.**"
 - "[If] two individuals share at an even deeper level from out of their own experience in their search for ultimate reality in life, then the **divine in the human shines through** and a new creation is born for both. To quote Martin Buber: 'Only he who learns **to love men one by one** reaches, in his relation to Heaven, God as the God of the world.' ... A worship-sharing group experience can **help us to 'learn to love the world'** so that we are more ready and more willing to answer 'Here am I! Send me.' (Isaiah 6:8)."
 - "Each of us in his innermost heart longs to be the **mature, integrated, compassionate human being who is able to respond rightly to whatever situation arises.** Worship-sharing can help each of us to **grow** along these lines."
9. Rachel DuBois, 1976, "Deepening Quaker Faith and Practice Through the Use of the Three-Session Quaker Dialogue"
 - "**Quaker Dialogue is not** group therapy. ... Nor is it to be confused with Worship Sharing, Creative Listening, Sensitivity and Encounter Groups, the Intensive Journal or Co-Counseling. All these group processes are valuable, but they have their own goals and methods, which are to be understood and used when needed."

- “[The] main aim [of Quaker Dialogue] is to **help local Friends who meet regularly in meetings for worship and business to spontaneously share their experiences in, and their concerns about, the ideal conduct of these meetings.**”
 - **“The following three topics** are covered in the three sessions of the Quaker Dialogue:
 - i. Our **religious experiences**, both outside and within the meeting for worship.
 - ii. The nature and role of the Quaker method of **‘finding the sense of the business meeting** without taking a vote.
 - iii. Outreach: the responsibility of Friends to their **social testimonies** such as peace, equality and simplicity.”
10. Claremont Meeting, 1976, "Fellowship in Depth and Spiritual Renewal through '**CREATIVE LISTENING**'"
- *This pamphlet had apparently been circulating informally for some years before its publication in 1976, as it was referenced by title in Margaret Gibbins' 1969 pamphlet. However 1976 version is the earliest I could get my hands on and probably had the widest circulation if not the biggest influence.*
 - “The aim of these dialogues is the **deepening of interpersonal relations and spiritual life among members and attenders** of a religious body, **through the sharing of meaningful experience** in fellowship groups. The method may also be adapted to professional or other groups.”
11. Claremont Meeting, 1991, “Fellowship in Depth and Spiritual Renewal through **QUAKER DIALOGUE 'CREATIVE LISTENING'**”
- *Revised pamphlet. Note the explicit adoption (usurpation?) of Rachel DuBois' term “Quaker Dialogue”, but applying it much more broadly than she did. To distinguish the two, some people called the Claremont version Claremont Dialogue, but that usage seems to have died out.*
 - “The aim of these **Quaker Dialogues or Creative Listening Groups** is to deepen interpersonal relations ...etc”
12. FWCC, 1993, “Sharing in Worship: A Guide for Worship Group Facilitators at International Quaker Gatherings”
- “By staying in the same group throughout the week, each participant had the opportunity to **get to know Friends from a variety of cultures and traditions of worship at a deeper level.** ... [T]hese groups also provide for each participant a **small, intimate ‘family’ within the larger gathering** where Friends can nurture each other in a personal way.”
 - “In worship groups, opportunities should be offered to worship and pray together, share concerns and experiences of the work of God in our lives and to **learn how other Friends express and test their personal Quaker witness.**”
 - **“To worship in Spirit and in Truth, we need to listen both to God and to each other.** In listening first for the voice of God in us, we **open ourselves** to feel the great love that carries us all every single day and which can sustain all of us as we meet together. We also open ourselves to feel that Holy Spirit which gives us more receptive hearts to hear what others say. It is in this Spirit that we can best listen to each other.”

13. (undated, unsigned, handwritten, probably prepared in haste for use at Palo Alto FM)

- **“Worship-Sharing is a way for a smallish group to address a chosen theme – often guided by one or more queries. ... This is not a committee meeting! It is a worshipful occasion where each may speak from the heart, safely.”**

14. Pacific YM, undated handout (early 1990's?)

- “Many Friends have said over the years that the Worship-Fellowship groups are **the richest personal experience of the Yearly Meeting**. They are places where individuals **meet repeatedly in deepening relationships**. A Worship-Fellowship group provides a **‘home group’** with whom (1) to share what is going on **in each of our lives** and (2) to share the **effects of participation** in the tremendously powerful Yearly Meeting experience.”

15. Patricia Loring, 1997, “Listening Spirituality”, vol 1.

- “The contemporary Quaker group practice, *par excellence*, that **cultivates both interior and outward listening – as well as being worthwhile it itself** – is called worship sharing. ... The word ‘worship’ in its name relates it to our experience of **intentional listening for, waiting on the divine**. ... The word ‘sharing’ indicates that – unlike in times of worship – we **do not need to wait on a special prompting of the Holy Spirit to speak**.”
- “Worship sharing can be one way of **observing the ancient Quaker injunction** ‘to seek to **know one another in that which is eternal**,’ by **sharing the innermost dimension of our lives** that is rarely given an opportunity to be voiced.”

16. Pacific YM, 2000, from “Guidelines for Worship-Sharing Groups”

- “We gather in worshipful silence **to share**, not our ideas, but **our own experience, which is not open to discussion**, and so we will not respond directly to what another has said. However, we may perceive that a pattern emerges in what is shared, and we will want to be mindful whether this reflects **a movement of the Spirit among us**.”

17. Pacific YM, 2001, “Faith and Practice”

- *Note that our Faith and Practice is nearly silent on worship sharing, but it does say this much in the glossary:*
- **“worship-sharing – a structured worshipful experience** in which all participants are invited to speak (usually to a query). Worship-sharing provides an opportunity to **reflect deeply on a topic, to build community with others, and to feel the movement of the Spirit within the group**.”

18. Palo Alto Meeting, 2004, Adult Education handout (George Mills)

- **“Worship/Sharing is an opportunity to encounter others ‘in that which is eternal (timeless).’** The format we follow is variously called ‘Quaker Dialogue’ or ‘Creative (or Active) Listening.’ **Through compassionate listening without cross talk or judgement, we seek to “experience the other side,” i.e. to feel life as someone else feels it.** It is a challenging format, but deeply rewarding.”
- The phrase *‘in that which is eternal’* goes back all the way to George Fox and early Quakers.
- The phrases *“encounter”* and *“experience the other side”* derive from Martin Buber.
- I was unaware of the origin of the term *“Quaker Dialogue”* when I wrote this.

19. Pacific YM, 2015, "Worship Sharing Leaders' Instructions"

- "These worship sharing sessions provide an opportunity for **groups** to **give worshipful attention to the queries presented, to share individual responses to the queries in the manner of vocal ministry, and to arrive at a broader and deeper sense of the theme of the Meeting: 'Fruits of the Spirit: Love and Justice'.**"

20. Pacific YM, 2017, "Worship Sharing Facilitators' Instructions"

- *Note how the 2015 statement has evolved – for example "leaders" in the title has become "facilitators", "groups" has become "individuals". These are not insignificant changes.*
- "These worship sharing sessions provide an opportunity for **individuals** to **bond, to get to know each other better**, to give worshipful attention to the queries presented, to share individual responses to the queries in the manner of vocal ministry, and **perhaps** to arrive at a broader and deeper sense of the theme of the Meeting: 'Lifting the Veil: Awakening to the Presence'."