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**Course Title:** Uh oh, Was That a Leading?

**Description:** The Quaker faith is based on the ideal of direct communication with the divine as guidance for our thoughts and actions. It is a beautiful and uplifting ideal but a little sparse on details. What is a leading? How do we know when we're being led? And how can we know when we are definitely *not* being led? Although there are no simple answers to these questions, the very least we can do is put our heads together. This mini-course aims to first ground our understanding of leadings in the Early Friends and the ways they understood Scripture. Then we will tour the way Friends throughout history have answered this perennial Quaker question. But central to the whole course is the chance to share our experience of Spirit in our lives.

**Version 2**

## Session 1: Introductions ..... pp. 2

Session 1 Content Outline:

Worship

Introductions

Topic Summary

Goals and purpose of the course

My goals: Sharing testimony

Deepened faith

Build community

Deepened understanding of the symbol of leadings

Ground rules

Floor

Duration

Interrupting

Spiritual background

Confidentiality

Kindness

Time

Additional considerations

Movement of Spirit in our Lives

Opening Question (for a non-Quaker)

Readings and discussion

Closing (Questions, Homework, Check-out)

Close with silence

Opening Worship

Introductions

Name, meeting, a fun (or not so fun?) project you're working on these days

Check-in: if you could describe your state of being coming into this course in an imaginary object, what "object" are you arriving with today? (Note: feel free to adapt this somewhat-silly phrasing.)

Topic:

One way of framing the topic is:

“One of the central images of Quaker life and practice, perhaps *the* central image, is the leading. So much else—silence, discernment, our committee-style, the importance of equality—stems from this root. For those who were hoping that this course would be a concrete, tangible, philosophically well-defined, knowledge-delivery about leadings, they may want to take this opportunity to head for the hills.

“For those who are willing to risk discussing something a bit mystical and mysterious, however, I do believe this course will involve deepening our discernment, often through the sharing of testimony to the working of Spirit in our lives.

“Traditionally a leading referred to “being led by the Spirit to...”, a leading to take an action or say something. Even nontheist Quakers, not particularly interested in this notion of God and Spirit, talk about leadings.

“This course is called “Uh oh, was that a leading?” because so often, we are living comfortable, convenient, relatively tranquil lives when, against our will, we are occasionally called to make our lives far more uncomfortable, inconvenient, messy, and stressful. Many of our lives already feel overwhelming. The thought that God can phone us up anytime and order us to sacrifice everything—for instance by engaging in nonviolent civil disobedience that could get us a fine we cannot afford or jail-time—is sobering at best. Certainly, God is generous with us and most leadings are a profound pleasure to fulfill. Yet, mindful of the demise of Jesus or the stoning of George Fox for instance, who doesn’t feel a bit of trepidation when some fresh leading enters our lives?

“I think it’s worth acknowledging that our Quaker faith is not always easy.”

Goals and purpose of the course:

**Go around:** what are you hoping to get out of this course?

15 minutes

Be sure to set the ground rules:

- Duration
- Who has the floor?
- Interrupting
- Theological difference
- Confidentiality
- Kindness
- Time

15 minutes

CONTENT:

## The movement of Spirit in our lives

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers): **Ask everyone to (briefly?) describe a leading that has changed their lives.**

**Note:** This should have been assigned as homework leading up to the first course. This is not being asked “on the spot” but should be a relatively prepared story. However, if someone genuinely couldn’t think of a single leading in their entire lives, then they may as well pass. I suspect, however, that stories will come to them in listening to others. It may be worth checking back in.

### Opening question:

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers)

“If someone off the street who only knew a little about Quakerism asked you, ‘What *is* a leading?’ how would you respond? Don’t let their eyes glaze over: this needs to be a snappy but honest response.”

(Give time for go arounds)

Note: This is also a pre-test, for we will ask the question at the end of the last session to measure the growth in knowledge and confidence. Don’t worry about making this amazing.

Sample response: “A leading is an action we intuitively know is right for us.”

### Leadings:

See [Reading and Homework: Session 1](#)

What inspired, surprised, displeased you about these quotes?

### Closing:

Further questions that I expect will guide much of the rest of this course:

- What’s the benefit of talking about leadings? What do we gain by *not* talking about them?
- How have Quakers understood leadings differently over time and how does that enrich my understanding today?
- Isn’t it a little crazy to think that God “talks to us”?

### Homework for Session 2:

Come with one leading-win and one leading-fail (can be a temporary fail) from this week (ideally from the week, but over the lifetime is fine). In other words, one time this week when we

detected a leading and followed it, and one time when we detected a leading and did something else, at least temporarily.

**(Note #1:** the goal is to focus our attention this week on the moving of Spirit in our lives *and* our freedom relative to those leadings. **Note 2:** I intend the phrase “leading-fail” to be melodramatic and silly.)

Do assigned readings as led

Check-out:

How was this first session? What was stimulating, challenging, exciting, scary?

5 minutes

We close with silence

5 minutes

## Session 2: Early Friends: Theology in the Age of Guilt ..... pp. 6

### CONTENT:

We open with silence  
 Check-in  
 Review the ground rules  
 The movement of spirit in our lives  
 Opening question:  
 Readings and reaction  
 Closing (homework, check-out)  
 We close with silence

### Silence

### Check-in

Review the ground rules (established in the first session)

The movement of spirit in our lives:

**Homework from Session 1.** Share everyone's leading-win and leading-fail.

**Note #1:** I intend the phrase "leading-fail" to be melodramatic and silly.

**#2:** The **facilitator** always tells the first story. This models for everyone the length of the story and the emotional vulnerability.

**#3:** Leading-fails are an opportunity to note the miracle of forgiveness or what some symbolically call grace.

**Brief discussion:** How does it impact us to hear these stories?

**#4:** Challenge ourselves to begin weaving course themes into their recounting of their leading-win and leading-fails.

### Opening question:

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers):

If someone off the street who only knew a little about Quakerism asked you, "What is your relationship to the things Early Friends believed and did?" how would you answer? This needs to be a snappy but honest response; don't let their eyes glaze over.

**Optional question:** what does the word “Spirit,” as in a “prompting of Spirit” mean to you? If it doesn’t mean anything, would a translation be helpful? This translation may assist in understanding this session.

Early Friends quotes:

See [Reading and Homework: Session 2](#)

What parts spoke to you? What inspired, surprised, displeased you about these quotes?

Closing:

**Homework:**

Since so much of the millenarian thesis, so to speak, is that Spirit is *already* all to all (which I’m saying is not true, cf. consumerism), how does Spirit’s absence impact our day-to-day lives? The homework is to seek a leading for every decision, even the most tiny, and pay attention to the times that this leading does not come. What I’m interested in is our *reaction* to the lack of a leading. What feelings and thoughts come up? What is the best we can do in this situation? Or what happens when we let go of our homework and use secular ways to arrive at decisions? Or do you find that leadings are equally available in every moment?

This “homework” is a massive undertaking—best case scenario it is nearly impossible, in fact. So, essential to this assignment are both a whole lot of letting go and also the intention to be gentle with ourselves.

Check-out:

How was this session? What was stimulating, challenging, exciting, scary

## Session 3: Quakers after Freud: emotional and physical signs of leadings ..... pp. 8

### CONTENT:

We open with silence  
 Check-in  
 Review the ground rules  
 The movement of spirit in our lives  
 Opening question:  
 Readings and reaction  
 Closing (homework, check-out)  
 We close with silence

### Silence

### Check-in

### Review the ground rules

### The movement of spirit in our lives:

**Homework from Session 2:** So far we've talked about leading-wins and leading-fails. This week, the homework is to think about leading-gaps—a time when that “still, small voice” is so still and so small that it's inaudible. Unlike the course title, this is “Uh oh, I don't hear a leading.” Since so much of the millenarian thesis, so to speak, is that Spirit is already present to all (and I'm saying that's not true, cf. consumerism), how does Spirit's *absence* impact our day-to-day lives? The homework is to seek a leading for every decision, even the most tiny, until a leading does not come. Perhaps try this a few times. What I'm interested in is our reaction to the lack of a leading. What feelings and thoughts come up? What options do we have? What is the best we can do in this situation? Quakerism seemingly calls for us to follow a leading for every decision in our lives, no matter how small, and where a leading-gap arises, to sit in expectant waiting and discernment—but isn't that unrealistic? What happens when we let go of trying to live entirely from leadings (and this is almost (if not completely) inevitable) and use other ways to arrive at decisions? Or do you find that leadings are equally available in every moment?

This “homework” may prove painful. So, essential to this assignment are both a whole lot of letting go and also the intention to be gentle with ourselves. Be ready to give one example about the choices we face when we live a “leading-gap.”

**The facilitator** tells the first story. This models for everyone the length of the story and the emotional vulnerability.



**Note #2:** I intend the phrase “leading-fail” to be melodramatic and silly.

**Brief discussion:** how does it impact us to hear these stories?

Challenge ourselves to begin weaving course themes into their recounting of their leading-win and leading-fails.

Opening question:

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers):

If someone off the street who only knew a little about Quakerism asked you, “How do you know when you have a leading to speak in meeting?” how would you answer? This needs to be a snappy but honest response; don’t let their eyes glaze over.

Psychological quotes and discussion:

See [Readings: Part 3](#)

What parts spoke to you? What inspired, surprised, displeased you about these quotes?

**Homework:**

How do leadings manifest themselves psychologically? If we were forced to look *only* at emotional, mental, and physical responses for signs of leadings, what do we see and would we be missing? If leadings are always different then how do we recognize it as a leading? Is this exercise unpleasant, and if so, why?

Check-out:

How was this session? What was stimulating, challenging, exciting, scary?

Close with silence

## Session 4: Leadings vs. Tradition ..... pp. 10

### CONTENT:

We open with silence

Check-in

Review the ground rules

The movement of spirit in our lives

Opening question:

Readings and reaction

Closing (homework, check-out)

We close with silence

### Silence

### Check-in

### Review the ground rules

### The movement of spirit in our lives:

**Homework.** How do leadings manifest themselves psychologically? If we were forced to look *only* at emotional, mental, and physical responses for signs of leadings, what do we see and would we be missing? If leadings are always different then how do we recognize it as a leading? Is this exercise unpleasant, and if so, why?

**Note #2:** Expect this exercise to be unpleasant or somehow dissatisfactory.

### Opening question:

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers):

A friend relayed a story where a woman asked him two questions about Quakers. I'll relate them in order, so we'll go around twice. Remember, don't let anyone's eyes glaze over; this response needs to be snappy.

(Put someone on the spot before asking):

Question 1: Imagine if someone not very familiar with Quakers asked you, "Ah, you're Quaker? Ok, what are your traditions?" how would you respond?

Question 2: "Ah, a feel-good religion, then?"

The facilitator answers this question last.

Leading as symbol:

See [Readings: Part 4](#)

What parts spoke to you? What inspired, surprised, displeased you about these quotes?

Closing:

### **Homework**

The homework for this session focuses on the relationship between leadings on the one hand and culture and tradition on the other. This is the question of whether leadings are aligned with tradition or somehow beyond or contrary to tradition. Keep in mind that real cultures are far from monolithic—they have competing tendencies and even contradictions. So the homework this week is to observe two leadings—either from this week or anytime in the past—and name a way that those leadings contradict a tradition and a way the leading aligns with a tradition. One leading may do both.

Check-out:

How was this session? What was stimulating, challenging, exciting, scary?

Close with silence

## **Session 5: Conclusion: Toward a Symbol of Leadings..... pp. 9**

### CONTENT:

We open with silence

Check-in

Review the ground rules

The movement of spirit in our lives

Opening question:

Readings and reaction

Closing (homework, check-out)

We close with silence

### Silence

### Check-in

### Review the ground rules

### The movement of spirit in our lives:

### **Homework.**

The homework for this session focuses on the relationship between leadings on the one hand and culture and tradition on the other. This is the question of whether leadings are aligned with tradition or somehow beyond or contrary to tradition. Keep in mind that real cultures are far from monolithic—they have competing tendencies and even contradictions. So the homework this week is to observe two leadings—either from this week or anytime in the past—and name a way that those leadings contradict a tradition and a way the leading aligns with a tradition. One leading may do both.

**The facilitator** tells the first story. This models for everyone the length of the story and the emotional vulnerability.

**Brief discussion:** how does it impact us to hear these stories?

Challenge participants to begin weaving course themes into their stories.

### Opening question:

(Assuming everyone present is quite familiar with Quakers):

If someone asked you “what are leadings symbolic of?” how would you respond? (Hint: I assume when you talk about a leading, you’re not suggesting that God literally “talking to us” or literally taking our hand and tugging us in a particular direction, right?) Don’t let anyone’s eyes glaze over; this response needs to be snappy.

Leading as symbol:

See [Readings: Part 5](#)

What parts spoke to you? What inspired, surprised, displeased you about these quotes?

Closing:

**Homework (meeting another time to discuss is optional):**

How does it feel when we view leadings as about love first and action second? What do we like or dislike about this? Are we more in tune?

Check-out:

How was this session? What was stimulating, challenging, exciting, scary?

Close with silence

## **Session 6: Story-time and celebration ..... pp. 11**

### CONTENT:

We open with silence (5 minutes)

Check-in (5 minutes)

The movement of spirit in our lives (15 minutes)

Open discussion (50 minutes)

Closing (homework, check-out) (15 minutes)

We close with silence (5 minutes)

(115 minutes)

Silence (5 minutes)

Check-in (5 minutes, 10 total)

The movement of spirit in our lives: (15 minutes, 25)

**Homework in advance of session 6:** I've been suggesting that in some cases leadings aren't a command to external action. Rather, the image of being commanded to action is, in some cases, a chance to align our hearts with love. In other cases, the action remains very important. What happens when we view leadings as about love first and action second? What do we like or dislike about this? How does it change our relationship with the Spirit to view leadings in this way?

(15 minutes, 25 total)

Open discussion (60 minutes, 1h25 total)

Thoughts, reflections, stories, experiences, silliness welcome. This is a moment to celebrate the connections we've built through this course, any way that we've inspired each other, and to celebrate our national and local community of Quakers across Canada and the Light in everyone in the world.

The course has moved quickly and perhaps this has been occasionally frustrating. Inspiring topics arose yet we moved on. Now is the time to take the best of the best of these moments, and an opportunity to discuss them.

No readings or opening questions is assigned for this session. Reviewing readings is encouraged.

Note: *this is an opportunity to find a group leading about what to discuss. In other words, in deciding what to talk about, we are putting into practice course themes.*

Closing question (post-test): (30 minutes total)

If someone off the street who only knew a little about Quakerism asked you, “What *is* a leading?” how would you respond now that we’ve had this course together? Remember, don’t let their eyes glaze over: this needs to be a snappy but honest response. (Give time for go arounds)

Note: This is the post-test to the pre-test we did at the beginning, to measure the growth in knowledge and confidence. The answers will be different than the original opening question, and that is good!

(15 minutes because people will discuss how this understanding evolved)

Big check-out (combine these questions):

The normal question: how was today’s session? How are you feeling relative to when you checked in, are you leaving with any intentions?

Facilitator note: Participants will likely have many opportunities to reflect on the course, things the facilitator could have done better, etc. There will be an evaluation form circulated, and the facilitator is available and curious for feedback at other moments.

Question 1) Invite participants to use this time to have them express how *other participants* have enriched their lives.

Question 2) Do you leave this course with any intentions? How might we keep this conversation going?

Question 3) What are the main things you’re taking away from this course?

Note: this course material is available online to be used by meetings. They now know everything they need to know in order to do this or another course, financed by CYM’s Education and Outreach committee.