

FACILITATOR GUIDE (Version 2)

Intended audience:

A course like this has a larger reach than simply the participants. First, the impact on the course developer, facilitator, and participants is ideally one of deepening. Second, many are impacted by contact with those who have taken the course. But, third and most interesting to me, some will be unable to make the course, but just in hearing about a course on leadings, reflect about leadings and perhaps browse the material.

- 1) I intend this course to have resources both for the participants and for “the envious,” that is, those wishing they could have taken the course.
- 2) I intend for this course to be fully useable by anyone who is interested, with a minimum of learning and preparation.

The greatest flattery I can imagine for this course on leadings is for it to be given again, particularly offline at a meeting.

Goals:

The facilitator of this course could certainly expound at length about his philosophy of leadings and transform the participants into a relatively passive audience. But what is much more interesting is the power of story, our ministry. Leadings, however we define them, are at work in every human being on the planet—we believe as Quakers that everyone has a measure of Light in them. This impacts the goals of the course.

Goal 1) The real content of this course is testimony: to the grandeur and struggle of living in a continuous relationship to the Spirit.

By testimony, I of course do not mean a testimonial in the sense of an advertisement for God, but testimony in the sense of a witness to the impact of Spirit in our lives, both the exhilaration and struggle. In many ways, much of the course content is expected to come from the participants. This is not a lecture nor is the goal to deliver certain ideas. In fact, the readings are meant to be more provocative than instructive.

It is worth noting that the particular themes of the readings may (at worst) reflect the particular interests and point of view of the course designer. Those facilitating this course are invited to substitute their own themes or material. The designer of this course would, however, draw attention to the four goals of the themes and material.

Goal 2) The themes and material are intended to provoke ministry in the form of stories. They are moreover designed to illustrate aspects of leadings in novel and interesting ways. They are meant to challenge and provoke reflection.

Course facilitators are invited, however, to not stress too much about getting through pre-planned material because of the third goal.

Goal 3) Community more than “knowledge”

The real goal of this course is a stronger community. Therefore, getting “off-topic” or very long check-ins can potentially be very good. On the other hand, this criterion of community does not mean that any old chit-chat and secular complaining should be passively tolerated by the facilitator. Whether or not a powerful and inclusive sense of community is being built should be the flexible but strict criterion by which facilitating decisions are made. Also, the estimate of four sessions is low and 1-2 additional sessions can be added if interesting themes arise. Do not cling to the course material.

Either way, stating too baldly the aim of the course—community-building—may be unwise in certain circumstances. I think many, including the course developer, are profoundly addicted to a sense of “accomplishing” something and quite attached to the compelling fiction that I as an individual have little to teach (or the inverse fiction of having little to learn). “Community” can seem utopian and lazy, or so vague as to be disorienting and discouraging. So, sometimes, it can be wise to emphasize the aspect of the course dedicated to readings and discussion, as these give a concrete structure and content. This is not dishonest since one of the most powerful ways to strengthen a community is to strengthen its grasp of the symbols that bind it.

In any case, naturally, the goal of this course is also a deepened life of faith, which is achieved through the fourth goal.

Goal 4) Gaining a more profound understanding leadings as one of the central symbols of Liberal Friends.

Everyone knows about leadings and lives them. Everyone discerns. The hope is that through this course we may discern better.

The role of the facilitator:

Provoke a deepening conversation

Inspiring those who speak too little to speak more and vice versa

Protect everyone, especially voices that might be excluded, create as safe a space as possible

Profess our Quaker faith and its symbols

Pizza—don’t forget to talk about what you love most (pizza?) and have a sense of humour

Model the kind of vulnerability and sharing that would be conducive to building community and a deepening life in the Spirit

DETAILS TO BE AGREED ON IN THE FIRST MEETING

Duration: 2 hours max

The time we will take together depends on how many people come. (I predict that 10 people telling brief stories will require two hours, whereas 6-8 will be closer to 1.5 hours. It's not just that every person gets a certain amount of time, it's the higher chance of people inspiring each other and speaking at great length, or challenging topics coming up that demand attention).

During the first session, propose an expectation of time.

Interrupting:

The facilitator or others propose reserve the right to interrupt but with restraint and discernment, ideally only for the following reasons:

1. Safety (e.g. emotional safety)
2. Time constraints
3. Clarification, if this is needed for everyone to follow
4. Technical difficulties (e.g. I can't hear)
5. Regrounding the conversation in worship and purpose, following a necessary order of discussion

Who has the floor?

Propose a method of discerning whose turn it is to speak—be it popcorn style or a Claremont Dialog (speaking in a circle), two traditional Quaker methods. The former requires more attention to ensuring that everyone feels invited to participate, some find the latter a bit restrictive and formal, especially at first.

The course developer tends to prefer the Claremont Dialog as being more inclusive, time-efficient, and orderly, allowing more energy to be devoted to content, and believes the importance of this kind of conversational structure to be wildly underestimated among Friends, but also views this preference as a minority (and perhaps even heretical) opinion. Either way, with popcorn style it is essential to limit the speaking to once per round.

Roadblocks and how to remove them:

Unfortunately, sometimes things are not so simple and rosy that we can just jump on a conference call or sit down with other Friends and have the profound, life-changing conversations I think we all thirst for. Three potential or actual roadblocks stand in the way, for which the facilitator must be prepared:

First, there are issues of trust and confidentiality. Second, there are fears of being a “bad Quaker” (either in the opinion of others or of oneself!) Third, there are theological difficulties, particularly different understandings of Christian doctrines such as God, Spirit, and Christ. Two

catastrophes are possible with this third roadblock: either holding back for fear of stepping on toes, or the trampling of toes. Nor are these two catastrophes mutually exclusive!

Here are the proposed measures to prevent and remedy these dangers:

1) Come in the first session to a shared understanding—and perhaps even a sense of the meeting!—around confidentiality. It is a natural question: “How far will this information travel?” Come to a shared understanding about how far these stories may travel beyond the group and in what form. The goal is for everyone to be clear on this. I generally suggest anonymity because I find stories have value but need not be attached to a particular person.

2) In order to build trust and prevent fear of being a “bad Quaker,” come to a shared understanding or a sense of the meeting around the importance of non-judgment and kindness to ourselves and others. Facilitators are reminded that this course may be a very painful topic for some. After all, if we are being led in a particular direction and yet we choose another path, that is precisely the classic definition of sin.¹ Everyone who is interested in this course is almost by definition aware of the possibility of not following leadings through free will. Some will call this sin—others in secular words will call it perhaps the possibility of fearful selfishness, of hubris, of rashness, of superficiality. Even if we believe morals are a human invention, and even if we are simply intuitive and mystical about morality, this course may bring up vulnerable feelings, such as shame and guilt.

In addition to the above suggestion, it is good to make jokes of the type “so everyone here has always immediately obeyed every leading they’ve ever experienced, right?” This loosens the tension.

It is imperative that course facilitators identify the potential painfulness of this course and the crucial importance of a generous spirit (to each other and ourselves). But of course this course will not be entirely negative, for we also have the eternal possibility of following leadings. No matter how many past leadings we have betrayed, the possibility of following a new leading is born in every moment. Christians would consider this part of the gospel, the good news of God’s forgiveness and grace, as illustrated in the life of Jesus. This course should therefore not be described in doom-and-gloom terms for integral to this course is celebrating the human spirit and the spirit of pizza (see: Role of the facilitator).

3) Similarly, the theological differences among Friends must be addressed in the first session. I propose evoking the metaphor of “listening in tongues,” a play on words on the classic Biblical story of the apostles being able to miraculously speaking in tongues. One approach would be to ask Friends if anyone is unfamiliar with the expression “listening in tongues” then ask if

¹ Even for non-theist, humanist, anti-moralizing Quakers, so long as we take the image of being led seriously—be it by a “Higher Self” or our own rational conclusions, a gut feeling—the situation is the same: we have a sense that would *should* (however we arrive at that “should”) act a certain way and we have the freedom not to. This freedom is precisely what leads to the possibility of guilt. Unless something larger and truer is doing the leading, the metaphor makes no sense. Otherwise, if we are simply deliberating; there is no “leading” but simply one side in an internal debate.

everyone is ready to listen in tongues when it comes to theistic vs. non-theistic, cristocentric vs. anti-Christian expressions of faith. Depending on the range, it may be worthwhile to ask people what their relationship is to these three symbols (God, Spirit, Christ) and ensure that everyone who does not particularly resonate with them has a useful mental translation in hand. It may be relevant to establish a system of “oops” (words may have offended) and “ouch” (when hurt feelings are arising) to make it easier to express and resolve these situations. It may be relevant to identify “danger zones,” (such as the concept of sin, oops) where theological difference could lead to hurt feelings.

It is perhaps worth some plain speak about the religious orientation of the course developer. You have probably noticed by now quite a bit of classical Christian language in this course. It may be worth mentioning that the course developer does not consider himself Christian. At this point, that may come as a surprise. The developer is a trained historian, however, and in his opinion, our understanding of Quakerism will be superficial indeed without a strong understanding of the Christian symbols that continue to animate Quakerism, no matter how non-theist on the surface.

Moreover, in his experience, Quakerism is simply easier to explain by giving the classic metaphor, ex. the symbol of God leading us. These explanations are understood immediately. It can be far less clear to try to explain “a leading simply feels right, but it isn’t just an intuition or the pursuit of self-interest—I guess you could say we are being led by our Higher Self, or God, or Allah or...”

Time

A few notes about time and the way the course developer intends for it to be used.

The fifth session is an open space—participants are welcome to discuss any aspect of the course they want to return to. The entire course before that touches on a number of topics and rarely gives a topic enough time to have a full discussion of it. This is relatively on purpose. To exhaustively discuss every angle would be impossible and it is difficult to guess which will be the most interesting. Therefore, the course is structured like a Quaker meeting in the sense that we have many thoughts that come to us and eventually, through discernment, one of them sticks and becomes our leading. The course allows for a similar structure: it presents many thoughts and ideas and then leaves it to the discernment of the group which aspect to discuss in the fifth session.

This way of proceeding asks for the facilitator to occasionally have a relatively firm touch, occasionally cutting short beautiful conversations that are left unfinished for the moment. To make this easier, three suggestions: first, warn participants in advance about this relationship to time. This can include jokingly referring to oneself as a human whip or whatever. Second, remind participants about the fifth session. Like every impulse we receive, sometimes only time can tell if it’s truly a leading. Invite us to test whether this topic is truly so urgent that by the fifth session it still seems the most important to us. Finally, third, remind participants that although building community among us is the main goal of this course, that it is not a bad thing if they

leave the course with something we badly want to discuss with someone but didn't have time in the course. That is not a bad thing! If anything, that is an opportunity to build and deepen Quaker ties, reflection, and faith. When this urgent desire to "spill" something rises in our hearts, we want to share and explore an exciting idea with someone. It is certainly frustrating in the moment to not have that desire met—it is never easy to wait. But the course will end in five weeks so the real question is what community can be built that will be even more sustainable? That light frustration is an important opportunity to deepen that kind of community.