



Friends World Committee
for Consultation
SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
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Finding the Prophetic Voice for Our Time

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Morning Plenary Worship at
the 22nd Triennial Gathering of
the Friends World Committee
for Consultation, King's Hospital,
Dublin, Ireland, August 2007

REPRINTED BY

The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

INTRODUCTION

These plenary addresses were given at the Friends World Committee for Consultation Triennial Gathering in August 2007, at Kings Hospital School, Dublin, Ireland. Doreen Dowd of Ireland introduced the Triennial theme "Finding the Prophetic Voice for our Time." María Yí of Cuba addressed the gathering in Spanish later that week. Her talk has been translated by Vicki Hain Poorman, then lightly edited by Wider Quaker Fellowship Committee members. We have tried to follow the capitalization and spelling conventions each speaker adopted in her written text.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Doreen Dowd was born in 1941, and brought up in Dublin, Ireland amongst Friends. She qualified in medicine in 1966 and worked in Ireland, Scotland and London. In 1992 she went to Zambia to work in a Salvation Army mission hospital. In 1998 she went to Lesotho, and worked as The Flying Doctor for six years. She has worshipped with Friends in many countries and attended the FWCC World Conferences in the USA in 1967 and in Kenya in 1991. Doreen has now retired from medical practice, and is working part-time in the office of the Recording Clerk at Quaker House, Dublin.

María Armenia Yí Reyna was born in Holguín, Cuba into a Quaker family. She is a minister of Cuba Yearly Meeting and the first woman to be its clerk. At present she is assistant clerk. She has also been treasurer and financial advisor to the Yearly Meeting, and vice president of the Cuban Council of Churches, for which organization she is now the Minutes Secretary. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Latin American Council of Churches.

identity and vocation in the Holy Spirit, and to the permanent search for holiness, that testify to the Holy God who sanctifies and who has given us the vocation of universality. This vocation embraces all creation and assumes responsibility for all people, carrying to them the message of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

After this important gathering, let us not merely store this message in our thoughts. We need deeds, we need to commit ourselves, and we need to be profoundly spiritual. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!

Translated from the Spanish by Vicki Hain Poorman, and edited by Judith Inskeep and Julie Peyton.

congregations. But in the face of this reality, God presents Himself with His love; this is a recurring theme in our sermons and daily devotions. The care that God has for His sons and daughters is manifest in them as a constant reason for praise and recognition. Our congregations, unsure of themselves as they face the reality of suffering, question themselves about the pain that accompanies their lives. Some needy souls look among the offerings in the religious marketplace for something to help with the suffering and the pain, such as songs, liturgies, salves, sanctified earth, or recorded sermons that might serve as balm.

What are Friends doing? We need to go back to talking about mercy and love, not from a place of inaction, but through daily witness to a life that is prophetic and revitalizing. We must be prophets who denounce sin and announce love, but to do this requires much reflection on what that means. I give thanks that God has allowed this meeting sufficient time to search for what love is and to direct our aspirations toward receiving spiritual gifts and announcing the Good News of salvation. The Spirit of God urges us to be creative, just like the flowers that bloom in some of our fields after ten years of drought. That challenges us. A different view of reality can be seen in everyday things, in the path we walk, because, even in these difficult times, clear signs of the Kingdom of God are springing forth in our countries.

To conclude: our Meetings and churches do not merely establish statutes and disciplines to regulate our religious life; they also support human and community values. Such support constitutes a prophetic statement about social situations that challenge our Christian conscience to make our very existence a sign of hope. A church may be a people of God, a house of God, a body of Christ, the dwelling place of the Spirit, but all these images refer to the presence of God and to the works of the Holy Spirit. In other words, any reference to being a church necessarily refers to the church's birth and life in God, to our

FINDING THE PROPHETIC VOICE FOR OUR TIME: WHAT CAN FRIENDS SAY TODAY?

Doreen Dowd, Ireland Yearly Meeting

Good morning, Friends.

It is a privilege and a responsibility to speak to you during this Meeting for Worship. I am sure there were other Friends who shared my reaction on hearing the theme for this Triennial: "Finding the prophetic voice for our time." I immediately thought of the Old Testament prophets whose words and deeds are recorded in the Bible. Presumably those who chose the theme were not expecting to set Friends up as prognosticators or seers with an unusual ability to foretell the future. Rather, in this context "prophetic" has the meaning, as my dictionary confirms, of "being inspired by God." I am reminded of our Meetings for Worship for attention to Business when we use not just our intelligence or our expert knowledge, but rather seek to find God's will in organising the affairs of the church.

It seemed a good starting point to look at who some of these men were. (There were prophetesses as well, but we know much less about them.) Firstly, some of them came from very humble origins. Moses, David and Amos were all minding sheep when they received their divine call. Elijah was ploughing; Ezekiel, Nehemiah and some of the others were prisoners of war. Secondly, several of them felt unequal to the task. Moses complained so much to God about his lack of eloquence that he was finally given Aaron to be his spokesman. Jeremiah said: "I am but a child." Isaiah confessed: "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips," but when he accepted the forgiveness and cleansing offered by God he was able to say: "Here am I, send me."

The environments in which they prophesied were very varied. At times Israel was materially wealthy, complacent that

its military might could not be challenged, while the civil society was corrupt and promiscuous. Inter-marriage with neighbouring tribes had introduced temple prostitution and worship of nature and fertility gods. At other times, the prophet was speaking to a people in captivity in exile, wondering if they would ever again see their native land let alone fulfil their destiny of bringing to birth the messiah. Did you recognise the harp music, played earlier: “By the waters of Babylon I sat down and wept”? The messages of the prophets were very specific to the people to whom they spoke, but at the same time carried a universal message that can still speak to us today. So this Triennial can produce a message that is applicable to all the Yearly Meetings represented here, although some of us live in countries racked by hunger, by poverty, by AIDS, while others of us are surrounded by wealth and materialism. The common factor in the message of the prophets is restoration of the relationship between God and those who would worship Him in spirit and in truth. Those of you who think the Old Testament is only about battles and bloodshed should look again at some of its images of God: a faithful husband, a bird protecting its nestlings and, of course, “the Lord is My Shepherd.”

It is interesting that the only reference I could find in the New Testament to the purpose of prophecy is: “so that the church may be edified.” Although we have few details of New Testament prophecy, the young church needed divinely guided insights in how to deal with its internal structure and how to deal with the pagan world around it as it explored the meaning of the gospel of Jesus.

There are undoubtedly some Friends who are already thinking: “this is all about words and ideas whereas I just want to feed the hungry, reduce dependence on arms, care for the environment, so that future generations can have clean air and water,” but the prophets often inspired practical action.

of welcome, of support, of comfort, of hope and of sustaining people.

How many solitary people there are in the big cities! How many millions of people have left their homes in search of a better life in these cities? But sometimes they find only disappointment and loneliness. That is why we are there as communities of faith and love to offer help to the lonely one, to listen and to share the experience of the blessed love of God. Our continent is full of violence, starting in the bosom of the family, and we must be of comfort to the ones that suffer. We need to speak to the tragedies that affect the health of the community-- AIDS, drug addiction, things that isolate and discriminate and separate us.

As we reflect on the work of God in our daily lives, we must pay attention to the reality that exists in our countries. It includes not only the foregoing, but also constant warnings about ecological damage. It is evident that the deterioration of life is taking place not only in the larger economic arenas, but also in the personal arena. Listening attentively to our daily lives means incorporating into our reflection the questions, experiences and searches on these new subjects and scenarios. It means starting from where people are, with real concerns and uncertainties in a world that is increasingly less meaningful for them. Our elders don't want to dream any more or envision the future, because it seems that today's common denominator is productivity, and for active leadership in the work of God they are no longer qualified. A desire for immediate results seems to be what counts. It is very troubling to see congregations that don't give an opportunity for ministry to children, youth, people who are handicapped or different, women, those who don't have theological preparation, or the elderly. These categories are excluded, just as they are excluded from the homes from which they are fleeing in search of the warm embrace of our

His path was arduous, because it was the road to the Cross and to the defense of those who suffered. Worship is a lifestyle. The Spirit comes accompanied by loyalty, by truth. The Son died, giving Himself to humanity for love, for loyalty to life. The Father is interested in those people who worship Him with the same faithfulness towards life that He had and that the Son of God has. God is Spirit, He is dynamism, He is love, He is surrender. He wants worshippers who worship Him in this way.

Today many people call themselves worshippers of God. They are people who are capable of raising their hands to the heavens, but not to their neighbor as a gesture of love. The experience of love is an experience with God, and it should produce in each one of us the ability to love generously in the same way that each of us is loved. We must learn to love as God loved! We must learn to make our lives a way of worship and of surrender to human life. Let us not keep the Lamb of God waiting. Let us open the door of our hearts and the hearts of our churches so that the Son of God can come in to dine with us. Let us enjoy the most delicious experience on the face of the earth: intimacy with God! A church that keeps its purpose of living a spiritually fervent and committed life does not sicken its Lord and Savior. It blesses the life of its members and is seen as a challenge to the visitor.

Our churches in Latin America are present in all the levels of society, in the depths of the mountains and the jungles, in the countryside and in the cities. Everywhere there are communities, people of God, houses of the Holy Spirit, centers that affirm the gifts that God has distributed as a blessing to all, and they are called to be places of comfort and mutual help. The fact that the church is present in all of these places is a great blessing, but it also is a great responsibility. It is a blessing that puts us in touch with all sectors of society and in particular with the poorest and neediest. That is why we are called together to create places

Nehemiah comes over like the rather bossy clerk of a large Premises Committee obsessed with rebuilding Jerusalem, abandoning his donkey so that he could clamber over the rubble to inspect enemy damage to the city walls. More than once, the words of the prophet led to the removal of pagan shrines. Although priests and prophets had specific roles in Israel, all of the people were expected to behave as children of God; farmers and merchants were to trade honestly and to treat their employees well--surely good Quaker principles.

These are some impressions of some biblical prophets. They were ordinary people, aware of their weaknesses, but willing to be used by God and to share insights with their communities. Have these ancient Hebrews a message for our 21st century world? To bring the question a little nearer in time, I believe the New Testament is also about restoring the relationship between God and humankind. Is not Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son about restoring communication between our Heavenly Father and his child?

Here also, in my experience, lies the huge challenge for present day Friends. Can we, with our enormous diversity of outlook, still find a united message for the 21st century? You are here as guests of Ireland Yearly Meeting and, for a variety of historical and social reasons, Friends in Ireland reflect the breadth of theological diversity that is found amongst Friends across the world. I know that even amongst the small group of Irish Friends here this morning, there is a great range of understanding about who Jesus is and His significance for the world today. How should we interpret the Bible? Was Jesus an inspired Jewish teacher, indeed a prophet? Was he one, but only one, of the people who have had a special perception of the nature of God? Or is He the only-begotten son of God the Father, fully divine, fully human, who died on a cross as an expression of God's profound love for us and our need of

restoration to wholeness and who rose again triumphing over death? Personally, I claim Jesus as my Saviour, my Guide, my Enabler; and that is not a creed, it is an experience. There are Irish and other Friends who cannot use such language, perhaps even find it offensive, yet they are very committed to living their lives according to Gospel Order, and their integrity constantly challenges my way of life. Irish Friends have recently had to confront our different interpretations of the Gospel as we updated our Book of Christian Experience, but we have managed, with tears and with struggles, to agree to continue worshipping together and sharing our search for God's will. I hope this Triennial will witness such love and grace also.

Early Friends, and those who have followed them, believed that authentic Christian faith has to find expression in action feeding the hungry, freeing the slaves, and seeking reconciliation of conflicts. In the words of William Penn: "true Godliness don't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it." I wonder if doing good works can sometimes become a ploy to occupy our minds and keep us too busy to consider our relationship with God? Is it "true Godliness" that is enabling us? The best loved chapter in the Bible tells us that: "if I give all my goods to the poor but have not love ... I gain nothing." It is not just "head knowledge" that we need but "heart knowledge." It would be well to remember during the coming week that even the gift of prophecy is nothing, it is useless if it does not spring from love. 1 John 4:19 tells us that "we love because God first loved us."

What then is our or God's prophetic message of love to the refugee mother watching her child die of hunger or malaria, to the politician promising bread and circuses or cheap oil with a view to re-election, to your workmate who thinks happiness is a new car, to the Friend sitting quietly in the corner of your meeting? You are going to spend the next week seeking to hear

themselves to gain something new. Repentance in this case means returning to the acts of love that were present when it all began. The Apostle Paul urges us to this repentance, through I Corinthians 13: 1-8 which we read earlier.

As Quakers, we are living in a time when this exhortation is very relevant for us. I don't mean to speak of any country in particular, but I can't forget the things that are happening in my own country. Marketing, turning sermons into theatrical presentations, competition between churches, manipulation of the masses of people, turning faith into a spectacle—all these tend to undermine our love, our motivation, and our Christian ethics. As a result, success as a motive will become the reason for their failure in the future, since all these things one day will go out of style—they will become obsolete, worn out.

But "love never ends." (I Cor. 13:13) The foremost purpose of the church is to love God with all our hearts: "the church exists to worship God." Jesus invites us into a relationship of intimacy. Even when the church is in a cold deplorable state, Jesus stands at the door at the heart of each individual, seeking to enter into him. The image of Jesus at the door of our hearts, of our lives, awaiting the moment when we leave our isolation and indifference to dine with Him, clearly illustrates the type of relationship that God wants with His church: an intimate relationship.

One of the ways of achieving that is, precisely, through worship, and worship demands exclusivity. These days there are many idols; many people are devoted to money, to excessive worry, to selfishness, or to things that should be secondary to the reality of the sacred, but which end up being recognized as gods.

We know that worship is not confined to any particular locality, but there is only one way to worship: Jesus, who worshipped the Father in spirit and in truth. In other words, there is only one way to worship: the way in which He walked.

mystical experiences of Christianity; rather, it lies in separating this search from a commitment to the transformation of the society in which we live. On the other extreme are those who completely leave out such experiences and concentrate only on social action. The mystical life, without a loving commitment to nature and to the human race, is pure vanity. Social action without the warmth of the Holy Spirit of God in our hearts leads to nothing. Either the two experiences must intertwine in such a way that they complement each other, or we will never enjoy genuine spirituality in our churches. The healthy alternative is found in the word “*integralidad*,” integrity or wholeness, integration.

When we do things—either inside or outside of the church—based on love, it is because we have grown in the Spirit to the point that Jesus continues to be our first love. When we do things just to be doing them, to support the institution or the denomination, or when we are seduced by numerical growth in the church or fame or the status to be gained, or for other reasons of this nature, our motives are impure or misguided. The church is born, grows and develops, and runs the risk of doing things for their own sake, day after day, Sunday after Sunday; worship becomes just one more worship service; the preaching is merely one more sermon that may or may not please people. I think that this process is similar to what we experience when we first come to know the Light. We encounter Jesus, and we are filled with new perspectives that lead us to a life filled with passion for the Master. But with the passage of time, we can grow cold, lose our motivation, and no longer do the things that we were doing at the beginning of our walk with the Lord. This cooling off surely also results from our activities having become routine. In part, it explains the disillusionment many people feel towards institutions and churches more concerned with maintaining what they have already gained than with stretching

more plainly the message that God has for Friends in these days, for our Society and to share with the wider world. While we value our heritage, we should not be burdened by tradition. We cannot relive the experiences of previous generations, but we can learn from them. George Fox was a Seeker, but started finding truth when he heard a voice, which said “there is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.”

LIVES ROOTED IN GOD'S LOVE

Maria Armenia Yí Reyna, Cuba Yearly Meeting

In our lives we are always seeking things: money, companionship, work, health, food...as if they all might run out at any moment. And all this seeking is purely selfish. In our churches, we are hyper-religious and yet we know neither what we seek, nor (much worse) do we know or at times even care what the others who come are seeking; all the while thinking that our over-the-top actions imply *holiness*.

So the first point that we want to consider today is that Jesus knows when we are *spiritually indifferent*. I believe that there is no small number of people in our countries who think that not doing anything wrong is sufficient to satisfy God. Jesus urges the church to abandon our tendency to spiritual omission. God knows when our offerings are motivated by selfish interests, when we sit in a particular bench or pew in the church in order to be noticed or when we raise our hands in a mechanical way, when we read the Bible merely to fulfill our daily obligations or when we pray beautifully but without passion, when we look at the poor with disdain and at the rich with interest. God knows all these things and wants to cure us of our indifference!

God affirms that He does not look with indifference on our spiritual coldness, and tells us that His heart is sad because we do not live in the beauty and wholeness that existed in the beginning of time. Often we feel proud of having obtained wealth through our own efforts. This brings us to our second point, that Jesus also knows when we are *spiritually arrogant*. A church that prospers materially, on the outside, can easily fall into the trap of believing that outward prosperity is the measure of its spiritual prosperity. We humans construct our identities from models. Our Master's life has given us the model we need for reinvigorating our spiritual lives. In John 14:12, the

evangelist tells us that we are capable of performing the same works that Jesus did. Mark reveals that Jesus was of a humble background, and some Gospel passages tell us about the social level from which He came. He began his ministry in Galilee, and His fame spread throughout that region. He cast out demons and preached, and He promised His disciples before His crucifixion that He would appear to them in Galilee. The process of warming up our spiritual coldness leads us to the life and example of our Master. But if we don't rid ourselves of our obsession with material wealth, we will never have time to devote ourselves to constructing something spiritually healthy. Dedication to our neighbor, especially to one who is suffering, is absolutely necessary.

And there are signals that can help us avoid deception. What are they? Glimpses of love, of service, of sacrifice, of respect for the opinions of others in many cases, and of truth. Christ is wherever we can see the sign—or rather, the signs—of the nailprints. By Jesus' example we are counseled to be more merciful; however bad a community may be, it is still a Light, not through its own merits but because of Jesus' mercy. He is always ready to correct, to forgive, and to welcome. The church is a project created in the heart of God. Jesus corrects us when we tread the path of a cold, uncommitted spirituality.

Let's look at our third point—the lack of commitment of the churches of today. People live spiritually at extremes: some dedicate themselves to praying, fasting, and living deeply mystical experiences with the Spirit of God, even though this may not result in loving service in solidarity with our neighbor. It is inconsistent to seek the power of the Holy Spirit unless this search goes hand in hand with commitment to nature and to our fellow humans. We must complement it and guide it towards the health of the planet Earth. The problem is not in *seeking* the gift of speaking in tongues, which is perhaps one of the most