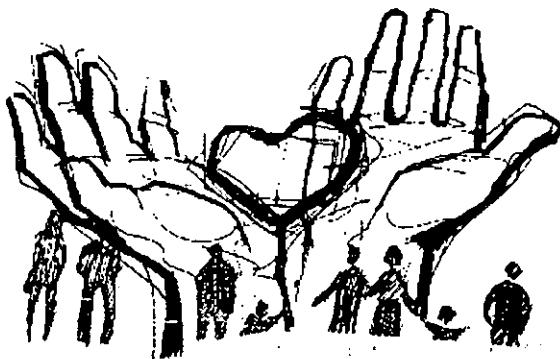


Instruments of Peace and Love in the Hands of God



Ramón A. González-Longoria
Escalona (Cuba Yearly Meeting)

Reprinted from
Walk Worthy of Your Calling
Edited by Margery Post Abbott
and Peggy Senger Parsons

Translated by Judy Maurer
(Northwest Yearly Meeting)

NOTE FROM THE WQF EDITOR:

This essay is excerpted from the book *Walk Worthy of Your Calling: Quakers and the Traveling Ministry*, edited by Margery Post Abbott (North Pacific Yearly Meeting) and Peggy Senger Parsons (Northwest YM). Both live in Oregon, and both are involved in active ministry among their own yearly meetings, and across the “barriers” of different Friends traditions.

Walk Worthy of Your Calling is a new release (June 2004) from Friends United Press. The book is an examination of the traveling ministry among both early and contemporary Friends, and includes modern Quaker ministers from a variety of countries and branches of Quakerism. We at the WQF were impressed with how well this book meshes with our goal of “lifting up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions.”

For more information on the book, or to order, contact
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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

This essay is a consideration of ministry based primarily within a single church. Ramón A. González-Longoria Escalona¹ has been a pastor in the province of Las Tunas in Cuba since 1976. He has also been active with Friends World Committee for Consultation and traveled to a number of FWCC gatherings and committee meetings as a member of their Interim Committee and as a speaker.

Cuba Yearly Meeting, part of Friends United Meeting (FUM), has been more isolated than any other Friends group, due to Cuba's political isolation from the world and religious persecution within the country. Interestingly, Retha McCutcheon, superintendent of FUM, has described Cuba as the healthiest yearly meeting under her care, showing that faith flourishes under adversity whether it is in the first-century Roman Empire, seventeenth-century England or twentieth-century Cuba. Ramón exemplifies the Quaker ideal of ministry as a counter-culture call from God.

A substantial portion of the Friends who have contributed to this volume, as well as the Friends who travel in the ministry worldwide, have been pastors at some point in their lives. This base in a church or meeting grounds their ministry in the practical realities of congregational life and regular offering of a message during worship. Ramón offers us some glimpses of the Quaker understanding of the "resident ministry" — both the theological grounding for his work and the importance of nurturing others in their ministry.



¹**Translator's Note:** Ramón's father's last name is González-Longoria. His mother's last name is Escalona. Sometimes he signs his name as Ramón A. González-Longoria E.

I've learned from personal experience that the Christian ministry is a call from God to live by faith in a world desperate for His message and His service, a call that involves both a challenge and a responsibility to those who respond to His summons. A challenge, because it requires a new way of living, walking out on faith alone, dependent on the Lord in every moment. A responsibility, because we must remain faithful to His call, consecrated to the task with dedication, love, faithfulness, and a willingness to turn ourselves over to be an instrument of service in His hands. It's a responsibility *to* God but *with* our brothers and sisters here and abroad. In taking up the challenge, we must always remember that we are not those who create the policies of the Kingdom; we are only its ambassadors. This ambassadorship, rather than governance, is very clear in *Luke 4:18-19* (NIV):

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In my youth, God called me many times, using different people. Pastors and leaders of my monthly and yearly meetings encouraged me to be a slave for God, to be effective in His vineyard, because they observed that Christ had given me the gifts for ministry. I preached at a young age, and was a leader in my groups. But I did not truly feel this call, this commission, while I was young.

I began my studies in electrical engineering, on scholarship at the University of Oriente, in Santiago de Cuba. Most of each month I stayed at school, far from our Quaker gatherings. In the four or five days per month that I was home, I tried to help in the church in every way I could, but my time was very limited. I saw first-hand the obstacles to the ministry of Friends in Cuba — a lack of pastors and financial resources, decimated monthly meetings bordering on despair, closed mission projects, discrimination against us due to our faith, and isolation

from the world community of Quakers because of our country's political situation.

In my fourth year of college, I was increasingly drawn to the pastors' voices as they prayed, "May God send workers for His harvests." These same pastors pleaded with me to answer the pastoral call. I heard God calling me in the many deprivations I witnessed. Then, I missed so many classes after an asthmatic reaction from working in the sugar cane fields — required of all students — that I had to take a leave of absence from my studies. Because of the law against vagrants, I was assigned a job digging ditches, which I rejected. I walked out of the employment office and ran into an acquaintance of mine who offered me a temporary position teaching chemistry. Months later, I decided to go to seminary. Only because I was a temporary teacher was I allowed to drop out of the work force. If I had been a laborer, student, or permanent teacher, I would not have received permission by the government to go to seminary. I came to realize that this odd sequence of events — which at first disappointed and angered me greatly — was God closing certain doors and opening others, preparing me for a leap of faith.

I set aside my engineering studies and left for the Evangelical Seminary of Theology in Matanzas, Cuba, to prepare myself and deepen my ability to serve God. It was difficult to set aside a secure, respected career with a good salary in order to leave home, leave everything, and begin a path that is scorned in my country. In Cuban society, studying theology is considered insanity. Religion is held to be "antiquated, obsolete, in the process of extinction." However, blessed be this insanity! May we have riches heaped upon us that can neither rot nor be stolen from us. For me it was an adventure of faith like Abraham's. It was like Christ's promise fulfilled when He said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33, NIV). In 1976, as a pastor and recorded minister of the Society of Friends, I began fully to serve Christ Jesus, and I will continue to serve for as long as He desires.

At first I had to serve four churches, because so many pastors had emigrated to the United States. Two were monthly meetings in separate cities and two were rural worship groups, which we call chapels. My wife and children and I lived across the courtyard from one of the churches, in a one-room apartment next to a pile of debris. The debris was all that was left of the Gibara Friends School. The first thing we had to do was to reduce the population of rats that lived in the debris pile. We also put up cardboard for walls inside our apartment. If I had gone into electrical engineering, I would have received the government's second highest salary, second only to physicians.

In 1980 we were able to move into the parsonage in Puerto Padre, one of the churches I was serving, and I have served there ever since. Through all these years I have been a Quaker pastor in the city of Puerto Padre, in the province of Las Tunas. When I began, only a handful of people attended — a tiny flock who had lived in faith and hope in God. They were well along in years. Their lives of faith and their trust in me spurred me to work with determination. I was enthused and motivated, newly out of seminary. I worked hard at my sermons, as if five hundred people were going to hear them. In reality, if seventeen people attended Sunday services, I considered it a great success.

An official from the Committee in Defense of the Revolution (CDR) would come by every month, asking for a contribution for Cuba's self-defense preparations against an American invasion. I told the CDR official that we would neither take up arms nor pay for them, but that he should come by when someone needed money for medicines or food. We did take part in their self-defense drills, but only as ambulance drivers or medics, on the condition that if the invasion came, we would treat both American and Cuban wounded, because Jesus said, "Love your enemy."

By the 1980s, there was less discrimination and people weren't quite as afraid of going to church. It was a

time of sowing broadly, hoping that perhaps one seed somewhere would fall “on good soil,” and that God would give growth to that one seed. We sowed in tears but we reaped in songs of joy (*Psalms 126: 5-6*). We waited on the Lord and we saw the results. Soon the group was growing, adding whomever God called, in whatever way.

Today we have a young church that testifies and serves its community. It's made up of professionals, students, retired people, housewives, young adults, boys and girls. In this work I am always aware of my dependence on God, recognizing my limitations and receiving from Him all that is necessary to carry out my ministry.

It has not been an easy twenty-six years. There have been moments of exhaustion, frustration, loss of direction, of saying, “So, *now* what do I do?” But I have always felt the only necessary support — the support of God, speaking to me in the present and in the past through the Bible:

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (*Isaiah 41:10*, NIV). “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (*Isaiah 40:31*, NIV).

I have shared these Biblical passages with many people, and we have all felt safe and comforted in the Lord, with new energies to continue.

I have also felt the support and encouragement of my brothers and sisters in the faith, working with them shoulder to shoulder, with the joy of being instruments of peace and love in the hands of God. It would not be fair if I didn't mention the role my family, especially my wife, Rosario de González-Longoria, has played in my ministry, supporting me in every moment in my ministry. I am not sure I can truthfully say “my ministry” — instead I should

say “our ministry,” because it has been a mutual call to my wife and me, to work and sustain each other, to suffer and cry together, and also to laugh and enjoy doing the work of the Lord together. We have been elders each to the other, searching for the Lord’s guidance, letting ourselves be carried by the Holy Spirit in the journey of our lives in Christian service. I don’t know what would have become of my work if God had not given me this companion, whose complementary gifts have entwined with mine to yield a more fruitful ministry.

I have also been helped by a sister in the faith named Delia González, who since the 1940s has served the Lord and was one of the principal leaders in our monthly meeting. Today she is a recorded minister in our yearly meeting and lives in Havana. Her counsel, comfort, encouragement, and constructive criticism were very important in my pastoral work. Her home became a refuge to discuss the spiritual state of our church and members, the problems of the Friends Church in Cuba, and our role as pastors in our society. Many of our ideas for our ministry flowed from these conversations, held in the spirit of prayer. She also worked tirelessly putting her gifts to use in the Lord’s service. She preached, visited, and clerked our monthly meetings, departments, and ministry and counsel. She was really an additional pastor for us. All that we have today, we owe to her faithfulness, and the faithfulness of many others like her.

One of the methods that we have used in this ministry has been to go out two by two, to visit members, candidates for membership, and regular attenders, and hold an informal prayer and worship time with their families. If possible, we meet with a few neighbors, sharing passages in the Bible, praying and singing. Several family homes have become house churches and now hold weekly meetings for worship at set times, which has broadened the church’s range of action and influence. Our work has not been limited to our own city of Puerto Padre, but has reached out to nearby towns, where we now have set places for worship.

I have learned the lesson well that a pastor, whether male or female, cannot be a one-person orchestra. A pastor cannot be the one who does everything — instead, *we are all members of the body and each one of us of has a purpose.* I understand this to be good Quaker practice. For this reason I have always tried to help discover and develop the gifts and vocations of the people in my meeting, and in other meetings as well. My constant refrain has been “put your gift to work, or else it will rust and become useless.” I’ve tried to have no one carrying out their responsibilities without giving opportunity to others. My concept of the role of pastors is that, as a result of their work, pastors become unnecessary, because everyone in the meeting — men and women — accomplishes the function of a pastor. This is, and has been, the goal of my efforts.

Young adults have been a special field of endeavor for me. I have shared with them much of the practical knowledge and understanding I have gained, in order to prepare them better for Christian service, through workshops and practical classes on preaching and methods of Bible study. I have challenged many, as others had challenged me, to listen to the call of God for the pastorate and respond, *“Here I am, Lord. Send me.”* Now I have the satisfaction, the joy, that five of these young men and women from my meeting are seminarians and head up pastoral work in different missions and monthly meetings, and another four tend to the needs of house churches in this city and nearby towns. We continue to work with these men and women. Not all have a pastoral call; some have other callings. Some are called to work within the church, others in secular occupations outside the church, which are also important, as God will use them there. We must not forget that the entire world is the Lord’s mission field, not limited by the boundaries of the church itself.

The Bible has a great impact on my life and my work. In it I have found the word of God for today. It has breathed life into my spiritual condition. As Martin Luther

said so well, the Bible is “the manger where Christ is found,” or, according to Robert Barclay, the Bible is “the declaration of the fountain, not the fountain itself.” The Holy Spirit, which inspired the Bible, uses it to speak to our condition, our situations; it carries us to an experience with Christ, because it gives the testimony of Christ, and, as the Bible itself says,

...from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is... useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (*2 Timothy 3:15-17, NIV*)

I cannot conceive of a ministry without the Bible. Part of my role is teaching it and using it in preaching, in pastoral calls to homes, hospitals, etc. The point is not to discuss whether the manger had straw in it, or if the straw was seasoned or green, or if the manger was this or that dimension, or if the diaper was white or another color. Instead, the point is that through the manger one can have an encounter, a first-hand experience with the Christ of the manger. The point is not to become familiar with the manger itself, but to come to know the one who sleeps in the manger, who molds and creates new beings within ourselves. The objective is to be able to say with Job, “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you” (*Job 42:5, NIV*). The pastor, like a good cook and dietitian, must take spiritual nourishment from the Bible for the congregation, giving milk to those who need it, and meat and vegetables to those who can tolerate them. For this task we must search the Source for the light that illuminates our understanding and our minds, so that the letters, words and prayers become more; they become the word of God within our own context — where we live, where we struggle, where we serve, where we try our hardest to live out our faith. We must not forget that we are not “competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has

made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3: 5-6, NIV).

I don't consider myself pastor of my congregation only, but also of the entire area where the Lord has placed me to serve. My focus is not only within the church community, but outside as well. I feel a responsibility toward all who surround us. For this reason, in visiting other towns in my country, God has given me a message from Him to share with other groups meeting together in worship. At these moments I have felt the support of my church, of my meeting. I am always aware that my church is praying for the Lord to use me, to put His words in my mouth, and that these words won't come back empty, but bear much fruit for His honor and glory.

Once I went to preach to a university group in the city of Las Tunas which was made up of young people of different denominations, and several young adults from my monthly meeting showed up in the congregation and helped me, just through their presence and their prayers. I felt an inexplicable tie that sustained me; I didn't feel like it was only me leading worship—it was as if those others were up front standing next to me.

It's not the same to minister to strangers as it is to those whom you know well in your church. When you minister to people you know well, you understand their needs, their worries, their problems; their way of worship is the one you're familiar with, too, and you know what they are expecting of you. Many times it's this context that motivates the message that you, inspired by the Holy Spirit, draw from Scripture. Also, you may later see results of your message in the group, or in a few components of the group to whom God directed His message. On the other hand, at times you may ask yourself, "What do they need to hear, now that I've talked to them of so many things already?" That's where the temptation to try to guide the Spirit comes in, to discern for yourself what they need to hear. It's also where the search — sometimes an agonizing search — in prayer begins, until the Good

Shepherd gives you the words His flock needs to hear. These words of God will "court" you, will hold you captive, will speak to you first. Then, and only then, are you ready, prepared to share the words, the message.

On the other hand, when you minister to strangers, you don't know anything about them. It may be that you know some of their circumstances, and that knowledge may help and orient you, but this is unusual. More often when you minister to strangers, you have to depend more and more on the Spirit, because only He knows what they need to hear. I have had the experience in which I have brought something to share, but the Lord changed the script on me. I have felt that the message I prepared so painstakingly, so thoroughly, was somehow not the message to be given — the message to be given was another one entirely, one not so well thought out. I let myself be guided, ready to listen to what He may want me to preach, to share during worship. I have also found that ministry flows two ways. Frequently, I see an obvious meaning in a verse of Scripture, but it turns out to be a new meaning for the others, and the opposite has happened, as well: the new insight is given to me by the worshipping community. In this I see clearly that God speaks to our conditions, to our specific situations, in different ways with the same Biblical text, but each different way calls all of us to the same action.

In traveling in the ministry you both give and receive. It's a beautiful experience. You have the privilege of worshipping and seeking God with other brothers and sisters, you share your experiences of faith, and you receive them as well, from others. Sometimes it is exhausting, because each day you travel to another place, a new community of faith, but in comparison to the blessings, the exhaustion is insignificant. You'll establish new relationships that will enrich your life — some of those become strong, indestructible bonds of brother/sisterhood. At times these bonds will transcend the individuals and tie together monthly or yearly meetings, as we have experienced with New England

Yearly Meeting, Southeast Yearly Meeting, and with the mother yearly meetings of our church in Cuba. Understanding the difficulties, concerns, hopes, and worship practices of other churches and meetings broadens your ministerial horizons. If you share these experiences and new understandings with your own church, you will broaden the horizons of those in your own flock, and encourage them in the testimonies that the two groups have in common. It becomes mutually encouraging. God gave you a message, and selected you as the messenger, and your home meeting sends you out. Then you return home, and those at home receive the blessings and the message, as well.

When I travel in the ministry, prayer becomes an absolute necessity, because intimate communion with the Holy Spirit is required in order to give His message. If we aren't in dialogue with Him, how will we know which message He wants us to give? Reading the Bible is also essential, because in the Bible I encounter His word and it feeds my life. I place a high value on prayer and reading the Bible while traveling; each one helps me to confront problems and to keep moving forward spiritually. They give me Isaiah's "eagle's wings" to soar over any difficulty I may come across.

At times you may encounter customs and practices that don't meet your approval. What should you do? Criticize them openly? Pretend you don't see? I believe that in ministering to unfamiliar people, we must be even more open to the Spirit; we must let ourselves be guided absolutely by Him and share His message, leaving aside our preconceptions and cultural worldviews. If God attacks those views—yours or the ones you find strange—then, praise God! But we must be certain that it's God, not us, who is doing it. It's a temptation to say the words are from the Spirit, when they are really just our words. Be careful!

It is in moments of difficulty, however, that you recognize the value of having a companion while traveling in the ministry. It's so good to have someone with whom

to share both the blessings and the difficulties, who may support you, strengthen you and give you good feedback, and then you do the same for him or her. There is great wisdom in this. In the Bible we see this practice. Jesus sent out his disciples two by two. The apostles in their journeys did the same. It's been the policy of many Christian churches throughout history. I believe they went out in pairs because their own experience taught them how healthy and beneficial it was.

I have traveled both alone and accompanied: by members of my yearly meeting, other Cuban churches, or other yearly meetings. I do prefer accomplishing the work with another person; it's a richer experience and has advantages for everyone. However, I must say that at times you may find yourself seriously out of step with a traveling companion. I have recently heard a fellow minister describe a particularly disastrous pairing. She said, "It was the worst thing that's ever happened to me, and if I had even dreamed it was possible, I would have stayed at home. If I had traveled by myself I would not have felt so alone." This makes me think that pairing people up for ministry should not be done casually or quickly, because traveling with a partner can become as much of a curse as a blessing. For me it's been wonderful, but judging by others' experiences, I can see the difficulties and problems that it could create. It might be useful to meet with an elder when conflict arises. I also think it would be very good to spend time together before a planned trip, sharing, seeking, worshipping, praying, and planning. And why not? Then you could undertake your trip, hopeful and confident you are taking the direction God has opened for you.

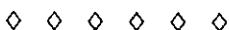
In ministering in foreign countries you may find yourself trying to cross into a culture and language that seems impenetrable. If you're trying to cope with this alone, you realize how important it is to have a traveling companion to help you complete your work. But I have learned that when God sends us out, He always provides whatever we truly need in our work. When I was first

called to ministry overseas, I almost said to God, as Moses did, "Oh, Lord, I have never been eloquent [in English. In this language] I am slow of speech and tongue." God's response was the same as it was to Moses, "Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." Upon arriving, I always discovered that God had provided Aarons — male and female — to translate for me, to fulfill his promise,

You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. **He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.** (*Exodus 4:15-16, NIV*)

The twenty-first century is still a newborn, an infant in diapers, but already it has had its sorrows. Its precarious inheritance from the last century is neither satisfactory nor promising. For this reason our message, our ministry, must follow the strategy Christ laid out for us, emphasizing love, forgiveness, justice, peace, and reconciliation, yet we must seek the specifics of Christ's strategy in our contemporary world.

I believe that now, more than ever, we must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our ministry, being attentive listeners but, above all, good agents of His will. When we look at the world, we don't see solutions to all the problems, shortages, failures, etc., etc. We stand mute, uncertain what to say on our own account. Yet God's message to the people of this century is fresh, redemptive, urgent, and liberating. We must be dedicated, more than we ever have been before, in delivering His message. The Lord is calling us to a prophetic ministry for this century, with a life-or-death urgency that is His signature, His trademark. We must trust our lives to the Lord and discover today tasks to which God is calling us, today.



About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

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WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498 • USA
Tel: 215-241-7293 • Fax: 215-241-7285
E-mail: Americas@fwccamericas.org