

Panel Discussion

Participants: Thistle West (RF), Lari Keeler (SC), Melissa Lovett-Adair (Visalia), Sally Hindman (SC)

Thistle West: greeted us and introduced the panelists. Asked them to share about their spiritual journeys and what has kept them faithful.

Melissa Lovett-Adair: These questions go deep. She comes from a long line of Quakers and grew up in Visalia, a place where Quakers let their lives speak. She learned more about theology in quarter and PYM, developing a sense of radical inclusion. She's experienced an unfolding sense of leading, often feeling resistance from if her leading has a big impact.

Quaker Oaks started for Melissa as a duty to her parents who felt a real desire to be caretakers of the land in Visalia, providing a place for indigenous people for ceremony and farming. Her parents believed it was a place they could have a real impact. Friends' advocacy in the Central Valley is needed now as much as in the 60s when they supported the farm workers.

Melissa's parents envisioned a conference center, but many plans denied by zoning board, their gift of land to their small meeting was a burden. Melissa agreed reluctantly to step onto the board for 3 years (would then become 15 years from that original offer to Friends) but this then shifted to a leading with the first service camp, building a sweat lodge together with the leadership of the local youth. They prayed together, and she came understand the vitality of land for their native partners. She learned about the history of the First People and the nature of intergenerational trauma.

She then needed to follow her leading out of love and a vision for the future.

Lari Keeler: I love this question. Very deep question and leadings come from the gut, the feet, not from the head. Two leadings in life have been super powerful as answer to their prayer. Lari believes there is something listening when we pray. Their first leading was to become hospice chaplain. They were doing Quaker Quest in Seattle and working with people on basic needs, and they experienced just showing up for people whose others had scattered because their conditions were just too much to bear. Lari had so many doubts and fears during their journey but had faith in the lived experience of spirit guiding them.

Their other leading was to love and accept themselves, truly believing that God loves us. Lari had a leading that they're trans and have both male and female. There was a huge element of faith in this.

Sally Hindman: She created Youth Spirit Artworks in 1987 and the newspaper Street Spirit 25 years ago. Sally was brought up Methodist with a minister grandpa, had a Quaker boyfriend, but she was determined not to be influenced by his faith journey but she was moved when started to attend meeting. She went to the World Gathering of Young Friends in the early 80s and became very involved with young friends and was very shaped by that. She'd been working for Ralph Nader. Sally had leadings about art and social justice and was discerning connections there. She was deeply influenced by the world gathering "Let your Lives Speak," and how to shape your lives as Quaker leaders. She's always been a vision person, visions related to theology and art and how art can liberate even the poorest. Inclusivity has always been a passion for her. She's always felt the need to include people at the margins and to use her privilege for that, and how her privilege could be used for God's love for justice.

Lari: I'm blessed to be in an ancient role; people have been working to connect our ancestors and our world, and that's the role of a chaplain. Witnessing and loving is so healing and what most people need.

I never wanted to be the chaplain who had all the answers, because that's the type of chaplain that I would want to turn away. Life is continuing revelation. I've been praying on these questions. I just worked with a 22 year old who just passed, lived in one of the nicest houses I've ever seen, and she was so bright, and that house was empty except for her and her mom and dad. We have a low tolerance for pain, but Lari can sit with it, though she has trouble with anger. Lari would sit with that family and call for supports from all beings. We need Spirit. People now can't see people before they die, so we need help from someone.

Sally: For the last 14 years I've been involved in interfaith ministry with homeless youth through YSA. Four years ago, youth from the project initiated the Tiny House project, so Sally has had project management/accompaniment of underserved young people passionate about tiny home construction. This project has involved over 2000 volunteers from diverse congregations who have wanted to be in solidarity with these young people. It's been the most deeply spiritual experience of Sally's life. There were lots of obstacles and at a certain point it became clear that we weren't going to stop this first in nation youth and art project. We're in the Bay Area, but there are homeless around the state with no real supports and everyone accepts it. Weaving has to do with finding ways to deal with injustice and local solutions. Even with Donald Trump as President, we can do this.

Today the electricians' union is out and Dykes with Drills is building. Saying yes to doing something.

Melissa: It's been 11 years since she had her initial leading and it's still a powerful growing edge for her. Her role is the board chair, servant leadership. It looks like administrative work on the surface, holding the container that creates a space that allows us to come together as equals. Rather than talking about programs, she wanted to describe the way she's come to her leading, but do look at the website for Quaker Oaks. How do we move from being a Quaker organization to include others, letting go of language and practices that divide us. Quaker Oaks values that it's founded on are not unique. We try to uproot the settler/colonialist mindset to create a trust so we can openly address these as they occur. Redo as in knitting. Some of work we're doing is on such a traumatized foundation that there are lumpy spots, so you have to be extra sensitive. Have to fix out personal knots that we create and have created.

As she started to work, she started to become aware of holes in her education and felt embarrassment and shame for what had happened on land in her name. She knew about the missions but not about the gold rush and bounties on the heads of people. But she saw that that was a place for her contribution beyond her fear of making mistakes, which she of course did make and needed to apologize for. Racism is so deep and so ingrained that it still pops up, even with best of intentions. It is only in communities of trust that people will call you on it and still love you. An affected person has to feel safe to speak up, and the offender has to receive humbly and make amends. In this community we can move forward in a good way that's part of our foundation.

Thistle: About accountability to community. How has your meeting understood your leading and supported it?

Sally: She showed us fence posts with 750 prayers and blessings painted on them around the tiny house village from interfaith community members. Sally calls herself a Scattered Berry (from Strawberry Creek) now, saying her Meeting puts up with a lot. Friends have to have faith the ministry is continuing. Her Meetings have been very involved since 1986 when she was sent to world gathering. She has had an anchor committee in Strawberry Creek for 6 years. People have helped with her weaknesses and fears,

and Sally's prayer is to be able to use her gifts and to keep her fear and flaws from overcoming. She feels that we need to trust God and surrender to being God's vehicles in the world, a very humbling experience.

Sally found it very moving to have her anchor committee so engaged and making sure she was honest. For example now they're making sure she has training in supervision. It's so valuable, even though she feels very out there, she feels very supported by Friends.

Melissa: She feels blessed by having incredible support for her calling. It's hard to ask for support but it's the greatest gift. After one Quaker Center workshop it became clear to her that she needed an elder and now she has had a variety of eldering support, including

1) Central Coast: spiritual sharing group, shifted from a group focused on one person's concern to their each sharing to one by one.

2) Elders – reviewing for meetings, she's started to recognize wins as well as problems.

3) White Women Unlearning Racism Working Group – partnered with Mary Klein who set up a book group, the group has shifted, provided guidance in how to speak up and how to listen

The relationships we build are the basis for the beloved community; the right order for work will follow.

Lari: They really resonate with basing community on relationships and allowing mistakes. Lari works with a lot of Christian and Catholic patients, and since they were a child has been interested in the Bible, thinking about Christ's life and His lack of popularity during his life, taking down systems of oppression and seeing people as equal. We can feel uncomfortable about things that are new that dismantle power and oppression.

Lari got a lot of support around their calling to be a chaplain but got a very mixed reaction to coming out as Lari. Some Quakers laughed at their pronoun request, saying society wouldn't allow for it. This made Lari cry. They are grateful for this platform that is bringing it up. What if we take a pause to be open to difference and not judge right away? Getting to lean into themselves means Lari doesn't want to kill themselves every day; we need to embrace difference. We need to see that of God in everyone. This is coming up right now in racism (fear of a black man running causes the neighbors to kill him). Fear leads us to not see others' humanity. We are all made in God.