

**NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING
Priorities Working Group**

Report to Fall Sessions, November 2012

The Priorities Working Group was constituted by minutes of the spring 2011 session, charged first to “gather the sense of the monthly and regional meetings and of individual Friends as to how the Spirit is at work among us and where it is leading us as a society of Friends in the immediate future,” and second “to distill those insights and discern from them a proposed Statement of Leadings and Priorities that is both prophetic and workable.” I shall give you a brief account of our work so far and alert you to two recommendations that will come to spring sessions.

We have been working together about a year and a half; we have met with twenty-four monthly and quarterly meetings. As we told you at Summer Session, in each meeting we focus on three queries: How is the Spirit alive in your Monthly Meeting? What work, ministry, witness is your Meeting called to? What work do you feel God is calling NYYM to do? We spend most of every visit not talking, but listening to monthly meeting Friends. If you ask what we have learned, I'll limit myself today to telling you some things we have heard. Please don't think that what I tell you today is a preliminary version of our statement of the leadings and priorities of New York Yearly Meeting. That is still our responsibility for the future. I just want to share with you what we hear, as we are welcomed by one meeting after another.

When we ask, “Where is the Life in your Meeting; what ministry and witness are your Meeting and individual Friends engaged in?,” we get answers about the importance of relationship. “Life in our meeting is love and care and support for each other. “ Supporting youth and families is important to the Monthly Meeting. Some meetings don't feel very connected to the Yearly Meeting, sometimes because of geographical location. Many meetings tell us, “Most of our focus is local.” We notice in many meetings a renewed interest in activity in community in peace, social justice, environmental justice, more participation in local events. Ministry and witness in a number of meetings is directed to their property, to maintaining or restoring a physical building, or merely finding space to meet, wondering whether they should build a meeting house. They tell us, “It's just a few Friends who take care of the property.” But again and again, we hear Friends saying, “When we get together, there's a good energy and the result makes a difference to the meeting.” One worship group spoke for many other meetings: “Meeting is a safe place to open up and to engage with others through sharing stories, struggles, and triumphs. “ One meeting experienced substantial energy brought to a meeting by the Young Friends in Residence program. They see YFIR as young people giving back their gifts to the meeting. With that experience, that meeting would strongly like the YFIR program to continue. First Day Schools are a concern of many meetings, who say they need First Day School leaders, but find it hard to get a First Day School going if no young people attend regularly.

When we ask how the rest of the Yearly Meeting can support you in that life, or what New York Yearly Meeting can do to help, Friends tell us that the Yearly Meeting can help meetings and Friends learn to deepen worship and ministry within the Quaker tradition. It can also be an opportunity to allow or enable a "critical mass" for work with conflict resolution, or the Alternatives to Violence Program. Also, Friends point out that New York Yearly Meeting can get media attention in a way monthly meetings can't. Many Friends appreciate connecting with the wider fellowship of Quakers, for example through workshops, and suggest regional gatherings or workshops that are not too far away. One meeting told us that the most valuable contribution New York Yearly Meeting could make to a Monthly Meeting is having events at local meeting houses. We see Friends hoping for programs like the ones at Powell House, but closer to them geographically. We see a hunger for regional programs, which the Yearly Meeting could set up, but which would engage local Friends in organizing and leading them. We often get answers like, “The Yearly Meeting has resources that we could use *if we looked at them.*” One worship group told us, “The more the Yearly Meeting addresses people's basic needs, the more Quakerism will help people and spread.”

I'm afraid none of these remarks and comments convey the one thing that has most impressed all members of the Priorities Working Group. That is the warmth of the welcome we receive wherever we go, and the joy and exhilaration that we have experienced in this service. Again and again we hear statements like, “It is in the spiritual aspect, more than the social action side of Quakerism, that I would like to have inter-meeting exchanges. Christopher's workshop helped us focus on developing the spiritual side of ourselves. I would like to have

visitations that would continue to expand my/our growth in spiritual awareness.” Friends want to take Quaker spirituality and use it to address issues such as environmental issues or peace concerns. They see Quaker support for their environmental leading and would like the YM to be a way to connect with others sharing this leading. Help with conflict resolution could also come from the yearly meeting. Thus our work is much more than mere information-gathering; it is a spiritual exercise.

Looking ahead to spring sessions, the Priorities Working Group will have two recommendations to make to this body about the Yearly Meeting’s budget, or rather about the process by which we set priorities when we review and approve the operating budget. It is clear to us that the priorities of the Yearly Meeting can be implemented faithfully only if Friends do a better job in sharing information about the work being undertaken in all the "constituent parts" of the Yearly Meeting (Minute 2011-4-33). At present, the operating budget is prepared by the Financial Services Committee, in consultation with the coordinating committees and interested Friends. Then it is presented to Monthly Meetings for their discernment, then to the body for approval. Yet the operating budget reflects only a part of the ministry, nurture and witness of the entire Yearly Meeting. Not included in the operating budget is the work supported by funds entrusted to the Yearly Meeting Trustees, Yearly Meeting Treasurer, Witness Coordinating Committee (Sharing Fund) and other groups within the Yearly Meeting. Nor is information about those funds usually presented during that discernment.

For example, a few years ago, working to produce a balanced operating budget, Friends considered reducing the contribution from the operating budget to Oakwood School from \$12,000 to \$11,000. What we did not know, as we struggled with this difficult decision, was that, in addition to the operating budget contribution, Oakwood School receives substantial funds from the Trustees (then \$74,000) and from the Lindley Murray Fund (\$4,700). Another example is Powell House, which receives substantial support from the Yearly Meeting through the operating budget (\$65,000 in 2010), but also receives further Yearly Meeting support through funds under the care of the Trustees (over \$12,000 in 2010). As a third example, outside Friends organizations (such as Friends General Conference, American Friends Service Committee and Friends Committee on National Legislation) receive support from the Yearly Meeting through its operating budget, but they also benefit from additional Yearly Meeting funds awarded by the Lindley Murray Fund. In fourth place, the work of the committees under the care of Witness Coordinating Committee is supported by both the operating budget and the Sharing Fund, but only the operating budget is presented to friends for review and approval.

There are many more examples of collective ministry, nurture and witness that are supported from multiple sources within the Yearly Meeting. To inform Friends more fully, the Priorities Working Group is considering a recommendation to gather all the information about financial practices into a consolidated financial report. We have consulted the Financial Services Committee, the Yearly Meeting Treasurer, and the Treasurer of the Trustees, and over the next few months, we will be continuing this process of consultation and discernment. Between now and spring sessions, the Priorities Working Group welcomes the insights of Friends throughout our Yearly Meeting. We believe a consolidated financial report will, in the words of our enabling minute, “focus the energy and resources of the Yearly Meeting” (Minute 2011-4-33), and “inform our planning and work as a body” for the ensuing four to six years. (Minute 2011-4-38.)

Our second recommendation will focus on the restricted funds under the care of the Yearly Meeting trustees. We believe the body should periodically review the work of the Trustees with respect to these funds, so as to determine whether we want to maintain the trustees' reinterpretations of their historic designation. Two examples are the Mosher Fund and the Caleb Sutton Fund. The Mosher Fund was originally designated to support the writing of Quaker tracts ("circulating books and tracts inculcating and developing the principles of the Christian religion as preached and practiced by the early Friends"). Now the fund is used to give books to monthly meetings and staff, at summer sessions each year. Perhaps at the time of re-designating this fund, the writing of tracts was deemed archaic. Yet we now have at least one Friend actively writing tracts, and publishing them on his own. The Caleb Sutton Fund was to be used by ministers of limited resources who "shall feel drawn in Gospel love to visit foreign lands." It is not clear from the Handbook, where one would expect to find such information, how these funds are used each year. In fact we now have Yearly Meeting Friends traveling to the republic of Georgia, Indonesia, Colombia and Kenya, who would meet the criteria of this designation. It would be helpful to know how the Caleb Sutton Fund is actually being used. The Priorities Working Group believes that a periodic review of the use of the Yearly Meeting’s

restricted funds, in the light of their original designation, would fill out our picture of the extent of the ministry we are sponsoring, ministry that is being performed in our name. It would also provide us opportunities for periodically reconsidering their use. Perhaps the trustees could report each year on a few of the restricted funds.

The Priorities Working Group believes that when we examine and restate our mission and priorities, having digested and synthesized the perspectives of our constituent monthly meetings, the Yearly Meeting will sharpen its focus, deepen our spiritual connections, encourage accountability and engagement with one another, and fuel our love for each other and our shared devotion to the light.

Again, between now and spring sessions, the Priorities Working Group will welcome the insights of Friends throughout our Yearly Meeting, and members of the Priorities Working Group who are present would be pleased to answer your questions or hear your comments.

Lee Haring, Clerk