

Background: Alternative Membership Pathways Working Group

The Alternative Membership Pathways Working Group (AMPWG), under the care of Ministry Coordinating Committee (MCC), began out of a 2016 Summer Sessions discussion about the importance to individuals of membership in the Religious Society of Friends. Friends of different age ranges and walks of life spoke to barriers they faced in acquiring traditional membership. In response, the AMPWG was instituted to discern pathways to membership. What we seek is the opportunity to embrace, nurture, and provide accountability to those we do not currently consider for membership.

AMPWG began by reviewing the history of Friends membership. In the 1600s, identification as a Friend was through declaration of an inward connection with the Light (God) and no formal membership existed. Formal membership was created in 1737 to ensure careful attention to each Friend's welfare. It was limited to those who were an active part of the faith. Formal listing provided the basis for Committees for Sufferings on behalf of persecuted Friends. Formalized membership sought to prevent ranterism, ensuring leadings would be tested and corporately discerned. Cradle-rolls and birthright membership were very much a part of Friends meetings but are no longer maintained in most Monthly Meetings.

AMPWG took this background information and delved into the current landscape of Friend's membership within NYYM. It focused on reviewing the Faith & Practice Membership process and reached out to a wide variety of members and attenders both online and at many Friends' gatherings, over the last few years, to obtain people's stories. The working group met an abundance of folks eager to be a part of who we are or remain within despite a variety of life situations. An AMPWG email account additionally welcomed diverse personal accounts of those who had membership successes or difficulties. In June 2017, an article was published in Friends Journal presenting viewpoints toward membership with a call for stories from readers. Those submitted were added to the group's discernment base. A Powell House weekend of roughly 30 people in June 2017 brought together representatives from three different Yearly Meetings to reflect on and re-envision membership pathways through centered worship, activities, and small group sessions. The AMPWG additionally facilitated worship sharing at the Friends Center for Racial Justice, holding space for Friends in Western NY, with questions such as: "Knowing that racism has always impacted membership, how do we invent new pathways?" Finally, AMPWG has also received feedback from the Attica Friends Worship Group, exploring ways that Friends can more fully support and include incarcerated Friends.

Some of the most important observations made by the working group include: The established Faith & Practice membership process does not bear similarity to early Friends' membership processes during the latter half of the 1600s to the early 1700s, monthly meetings of today do not consistently follow the membership process delineated in Faith & Practice, and there has been no

significant attention paid to marginalized communities in our society to make those within them feel welcome in membership.

Taking into account this knowledge, the AMPWG worked to identify barriers that exist for those who are seeking to either join Quakerism or remain in it, but are isolated from, or unable to attend, regular Monthly Meetings. Some of the barriers uncovered include incarceration, differences in culture, scheduling conflicts, distance, caretaking duties, and inability of a local meeting to speak to a person's spiritual condition. AMPWG concluded from this gathering of stories that there needs to be a new process beyond the one that currently stands and then began drafting one.

While that draft was underway, Friends approached the working group with concerns about creation of alternate pathways to membership. They expressed worry about how these new Friends could be active within our community, how they could assist in serving it, and how they would provide financial support (when able). The group incorporated these concerns into clearness for membership to ensure the community would be well served in this capacity by new Friends. Special attention was paid to financial support because while Friends are usually reluctant to monetize membership, support is critical when it can be obtained.

AMPWG was also made aware of concerns related to spiritual nurture. People expressed concerns centered around the idea that a pathway to membership, directly through the Yearly Meeting, would mean new members could not build necessary relationships with Friends. The working group spent time with the Yearly Meeting Ministry Coordinating Committee to ensure this nurture would be given space and attention and emphasis would be put upon it in the membership process through increased diligence.

Because Friends traditionally lived and worked in towns and communities of Friends and often moved as a group to new locations, the challenges of today did not exist. We are at a time in Friends history in which we see new generations rising up as well as new ways of living and family dynamics. New social realities have developed in such numbers that we feel deeply lead to communicate their essence to New York Friends. Today communities of all types are charged with re-evaluating aspects of their structures - due to the radical changes that have arisen in our world.

None of these concerns are particularly new to Quakerism. In 1656, Richard Farnsworthy and William Dewsbury of Balby Meeting in Yorkshire offered the following suggestions, noting difficulties then that are common now:

That the particular meetings by all the children of Light, be duly kept and observed, where they be already settled, every first-day of the week; except they be moved to other places. And that general meetings be kept in order and sweet in the life of God, on some

other day of the week than on the First-day, unless there be a moving to the contrary: that so in the light and life, the meetings may be kept, to the praise of God."

As the Epistle then noted: "these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."

The first reading that you are about to hear from Faith and Practice offers a direct membership in a wider fellowship of Quakers in NYYM, which would be led by a Yearly Meeting Committee, and members so accepted would be cleared and then cared for by groups established by the Ministry and Pastoral Care Committee, to include such members as could provide oversight and support.

Please help us in creating this path and learning as we walk down it. We firmly believe we are charged with ensuring access to our beloved community and to provide attentiveness to the needs of all Quaker peoples.