

Report from Liaison Committee
NYYM Summer Sessions, 2020
Our Leadings and Priorities

PART ONE: How did all of this begin?

At fall sessions of 2009, the clerk of Financial Services offered a report on behalf of that committee. How could we determine and approve a yearly meeting budget without first answering some fundamental questions? Who are we? How are we led? How do we support and follow the leadings God gives?

The yearly meeting, gathered in worship, asked the Liaison Committee to consider these questions. At spring sessions of 2010, that committee suggested that the questions posed were too big to be answered just by Friends in the room. The answers should be gleaned from monthly meetings and worship groups. Once received, the answers should also guide our staff's work plan and the work of coordinating committees.

And so we set for ourselves the following work: to find out, from Friends in monthly meetings and worship groups, who the yearly meeting is as a whole and how it is led--and then to use this information to guide our budget, our staff's work plan, and the work of coordinating committees.

PART TWO: What happened next?

Even after the need for listening was identified, it took some time for Friends to discern next steps. A year passed before Friends gathered at spring sessions 2011 approved forming an "ad hoc Priorities Working Group."

We minuted asking the following people to be part of the group: "the Yearly Meeting clerk, assistant clerk and general secretary, the clerk or a named representative of Financial Services Committee, Young Adult Friends, each coordinating committee, and each regional meeting."

And we charged the group "(a) 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; (b) to distill those insights and discern from them a proposed Statement of Leadings and Priorities that is both prophetic and workable; (c) to reflect these insights and priorities back to our constituent regions to ensure that the Working Group has discerned accurately; (d) to report its findings to the Yearly Meeting Body and to lead the process for considering and approving the Statement of Leadings and Priorities; and (e) to design a process to assess the implementation of these priorities."

We heard progress reports from the Priorities Working Group in fall 2011, spring 2012, summer 2012, fall 2012, spring 2013, summer 2013, fall 2013, and spring 2014. Most of those progress

reports are available in old yearbooks, online, or both, and they are public documents that everyone is welcome to read.

Between spring of 2011 and spring of 2014, the members of the Priorities Working Group did a lot of visiting. They visited 53 monthly meetings, 3 worship groups, and 5 prison worship groups. Usually, the working group made these visits in pairs, with two working group members to each meeting. They asked everyone they visited the same three questions: Usually, the working group made these visits in pairs, with two working group members to each meeting. They asked everyone they visited the same three questions:

First, How is the Spirit alive in your Monthly Meeting? Second, What work, ministry, witness is your Meeting called to? And third, How can the rest of the Yearly Meeting support you in that life?

The working group members took notes on the visits and sent their notes to meetings afterwards, to make sure they were accurate. Toward the end of the three years, the members of the working group distilled what they had heard to a series of six leadings and priorities. Those were:

We envision a yearly meeting deeply grounded in the practice of our faith.

We hear a clear sense from Friends that the core of all they do centers in their Meeting for Worship and their life as a community. In support of this, their primary focus, Friends seek help in spiritual deepening, in developing clerking skills, in understanding principles of meetings for business, in understanding the role of vocal ministry and afterthoughts, in practicing pastoral care and conflict transformation, in participation in first day school and adult religious education programs. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the development of programs to teach and share our spiritual skills with each other, and to help meetings to revitalize themselves.

We envision a yearly meeting made up of strong, vital monthly meetings.

Meetings and Friends seek information and assistance with the necessities of operating a meeting, such as insurance, cemetery maintenance, fund-raising and advancement. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the development of programs to help sustain our monthly meetings financially and to increase membership.

We envision a yearly meeting gathered together into one body.

Friends express a deep yearning for increased contact and connection with each other. Regular interaction among Friends throughout New York Yearly Meeting helps sustain and deepen our Society. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly

Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the pursuit of greater contact and spiritual relationship among Friends.

We envision a yearly meeting that nurtures our children, youth, and young adults.

We hear Friends' call to focus attention on integrating our children, youth and young adults into the fabric of our community and to provide opportunities for them to experience and reflect on our spiritual practices. We seek to offer abundant opportunities and welcoming spaces for exploring and growing into the Light. We seek to make our monthly meetings a place where they can develop loving relationships with peers and adults, where youth are supported as they transition to adulthood, and where young adults are recognized for their gifts and encouraged in their participation in their monthly meetings and beyond. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the nurturing of our children, youth, and young adults.

We envision a yearly meeting that supports and amplifies our witness.

Meetings and Friends look to the Yearly Meeting to be an active presence in the broader society for Friends' faith, values, ministry and witness. Through the Yearly Meeting, Friends can magnify our impact on our communities, nation and the world. Our collective voice speaks more loudly than those of individual Friends or monthly meetings. The Yearly Meeting affords the opportunity for Friends carrying common concerns to act in concert. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the responsibility to be an active voice for Friends' faith, values, ministry and witness in the world, and to support Friends active witness.

We envision a yearly meeting that is accountable and transparent.

Meetings and Friends express concern that the Yearly Meeting organization has not been fully accountable and transparent in its operations. We envision a yearly meeting whose structure and operations are well understood by all Friends, and which is a faithful expression of the leadings of those Friends that make up the Yearly Meeting. In approving this Statement to guide our activities in the immediate future, we also bear a duty to assure that these Leadings and Priorities are faithfully implemented. We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting the responsibility to hold itself accountable to the above priorities, ensuring their faithful fruition.

Many of those who were present remember summer sessions 2014, when we approved the leadings and priorities, as being difficult. It took several days for us to approve the six statements. Minute 2014-07-31 reads, "Friends approved the Statement of Leadings and Priorities as presented. It was noted that we have experienced conflict transformation – also joy and humility."

This report won't include why the approval of these priorities was difficult because we did not put the reasons in our minutes. That means there's no objective record. Various Friends' memories of the events are naturally quite different from one another.

We approved the priorities for five years. Therefore, our approval of the statement of leadings and priorities would expire at summer sessions 2019.

Whose responsibility would it be to make sure that we used the six priorities? We said the priorities would guide our budgeting, our staff work plans, and the work of coordinating committees. How would we make sure this happened? The final paragraph approved read as follows:

While particular committees may be well-suited for pursuing parts of this vision, these are the Priorities of the Yearly Meeting as a whole. We are all responsible for all the aspects of this work. The Priorities arise from considerable and consistent input from Friends across the Yearly Meeting. Their realization will require the worshipful and focused dedication of everyone within the Yearly Meeting, including all our committees and working groups, all our staff, and all concerned Friends and meetings. We are called to work together to make this vision a reality.

However, Friends continued to try to find some form of accountability beyond "we are all responsible." The Priorities Working Group had suggested the formation of a group to provide such accountability, but we did not approve this. We spent time in worship together on this question in fall 2014 and in spring 2015. We were not able to approve next steps. We approve some implementation minutes specific to finances in spring 2015. At spring 2015, we also laid down the original Priorities Working Group.

In summer 2015, the Liaison Committee created a working group under its care. That group was charged to provide accountability and support as Friends implemented the priorities. The formation of this working group didn't require approval because it was a working group under the care of the Liaison Committee.

The "Leadings and Priorities Support Working Group" spent about a year refining its charge. Then, it reported to the yearly meeting in summer 2016 and summer 2018. The group also published a few articles in Spark, the yearly meeting newsletter. This group was never fully populated. It always had far fewer members than its charge said it should have. The group formally requested to be laid down in summer 2019. The Liaison Committee laid down the working group as requested.

The same summer, the leadings and priorities statement, approved in summer 2014 for a period of five years, formally expired.

PART THREE: What good things emerged from this process?

There were some really good things that came from this process.

The PWG visits themselves were good experiences for the meetings, the PWG visitors, and the Yearly Meeting as a whole. One of the common responses to the PWG visits was a version of “great to see folks from Yearly Meeting – we want more!” The PWG made their visits in pairs, comparing their responses and impressions to give depth and breadth to the listening and to the reporting. More Friends became acquainted with one another. Yearly Meeting had some “faces” attached to it. And meetings got direct responses and information about activities and processes of the Yearly Meeting. Most importantly, the PWG visitors shared worship and fellowship as well as a discussion of practical matters. They got a more clear sense of how each meeting was really faring than can be gotten from reports or calls.

The work of determining and approving priorities was an on-going discernment process. The PWG reported regularly. Each time, we were compelled to consider what we are about as a yearly meeting. Who are we as groups of Friends and individuals who strive to create and live in community? This gave us a continuing call to be in discernment. Visitations to meetings were opportunities for discernment, both for the meeting and for the PWG. The presentation of the reports to the body of the Yearly Meeting were as well. The commitment to the ongoing discernment process was in itself useful.

In response to the second priority, about strong, vital monthly meetings, an Outreach Working Group was formed. The OWG did research, communication, development of outreach resources, grantmaking for outreach projects, and direct assistance to monthly meetings. From 2017–2019, eighteen monthly meetings participated in the Outreach Practitioners' Circle. This was a learning circle that met bi-monthly by video conference to support and nurture outreach in local meetings. In 2018, a series of focus groups and a survey formed the basis of a 60-page Outreach Report to NYYM. The report documented a growing need for more effective outreach assistance and resources. To plan for a sustainable and ongoing response to this need, a diverse group of twenty-five Friends convened for a weekend of discernment. The discernment produced a three-year NYYM Outreach Action Plan. In 2020, several elements of the action plan are being implemented. An Outreach Coaching Network will assist local meetings at whatever stage of outreach they find themselves. A Storytelling Network will gather and disseminate Friends' stories of radical faithfulness. An Online Resource group will make outreach materials more easily available. A new Outreach Working Group will be formed to guide and coordinate outreach efforts in NYYM going forward. The group will also work with an Outreach Coordinator to oversee and support the Outreach Action Plan.

In response to the sixth priority, much work has been done by the Treasurers and the Trustees as well as the Financial Services Committee to increase the transparency and comprehensibility of yearly meetings finances. The trustees finances are reported in the regular budget reports. Our financial procedures have been tidied up and written down, enabling consistent application; these documents are living documents and will be updated as needed.

Ministry Coordinating Committee began its internal budgeting process with a question. "How is our work benefitting Friends in local meetings?" This change was a response to the second priority, about strong, vital monthly meetings. It was also a response to the sixth priority, about being accountable and transparent.

A lot of different pieces of work have risen in response to the fourth priority, about nurturing our children, youth, and young adults. We had Gabi Savory-Bailey serving as young adult field secretary. We hired Melinda Wenner Bradley as our children and youth field secretary. When Gabi and Melinda both left their positions, we hired Emily Provance, and later Marissa Badgley, as interim young adult field secretaries. Also, the youth committee was revitalized. The Vital Meetings Project provided concrete support for local meetings in developing stronger multi-generational communities. We held many young adult retreats and family gatherings. We provided training for Friends in local meetings to help with engagement and support of our younger generations. Most recently, we've launched a young adult mentorship program.

There are other things that New York Yearly Meeting does well that connect directly to the priorities. However, many of those things are continuations of work that had already been happening, so they're not included here. Some other things might have been a result of the priorities process, but there don't seem to be directly identifiable connections. Sometimes, when a certain concept is sort of "in the air," it has indirect effects that aren't easy to track. That could have happened in a variety of ways after we named the six priorities.

PART FOUR: Should we do it again?

The questions we started with haven't gone away. Who are we? How are we led? How do we support and follow the leadings God gives? These questions are at the heart of moving forward together--in our budgeting, in our staff work, in our committee work, and in becoming a more fully inclusive community.

Nevertheless, the Liaison Committee is not recommending that we repeat the priorities process.

PART FIVE: But if the original questions still exist, why not repeat the process?

There are some real limitations to the priorities process as a way of answering the key questions: Who are we? How are we led? How do we support and follow the leadings God gives?

For one thing, the distillation process that follows listening to Friends across New York Yearly Meeting led to priorities that were very broad. This is natural. Lots of diverse input, when blended into a few statements that include as much of that input as possible, becomes less specific in the process. But broad priorities are difficult to use as guidance for a budget, a staff

work plan, or direction for coordinating committees. When priorities are broad, it seems like almost anything can fit them.

We also know that we exist in a state of continuing revelation. A process that takes as much as ten years isn't quick enough to respond to changes in how we are led as a people. What we really need within our structure is enough agility to respond to new leadings and new Friends.

And finally, the priorities process mostly didn't include consideration of state of the meeting reports, meetings for discernment, and staff members' discoveries/perceptions. It was supposed to. But in practice, that was very difficult to do. And there was no way at all to incorporate new information and alter the priorities after they had been approved.

PART SIX: Then how do we address the original questions?

As Friends, we will probably always be asking the same questions: Who are we? How are we led? How do we support and follow the leadings God gives? This, in itself, is a sacred charge.

These questions were originally formulated in 2009 by a group that was preparing our budget. Going forward, we must continue to ask these questions as we develop our budgets, and even as we develop the processes by which we will develop our budgets.

How do we have group discernment to determine the best financial support for the leadings God gives? How do we know if our budget is a reflection of who we are? And in both of these questions, who are "we"? Does "we" include all of New York Yearly Meeting, or does it include only those who are able to be in the room when discernment is being done?

How do we support and follow the leadings God gives in times of apparent scarcity of resources? Do we have sufficient trust in one another, and sufficient flexibility, to respond to continuing revelation?

The work of our staff, and the work of our committees, is meant to be in service of all the Friends of New York Yearly Meeting. But most Friends are not in the room when corporate discernment is being done. We must find practical ways to widen our definition of "we." The responses to these three questions--Who are we? How are we led? How do we support and follow the leadings God gives?--must be gleaned from Friends throughout New York Yearly Meeting.

The Liaison Committee recommends that committees, working groups, task groups, and staff pay attention to the state of the meeting reports and other communications from local meetings. We can use this information to guide our work. We recommend that staff, committees, and groups focus on finding, developing, and providing resources that are directly useful to Friends throughout New York Yearly Meeting.

This would include representatives to organizations beyond New York Yearly Meeting. We recommend that these representatives seek as many mediums and venues as possible by which to report back to local and regional meetings after attending gatherings of the respective organizations.

As we move forward, we'll also need to continue our work of being as inclusive as possible in the gatherings of New York Yearly Meeting. Limited participation in corporate worship does lead to limits on our discernment. Our ability to serve all Friends is restricted when we do not have a diversity of races, classes, ages, abilities, gender identities, and other identities within the group participating in discernment.

The yearly meeting is already taking some steps toward becoming more inclusive. We've been using Pay-as-Led for sessions and other gatherings. We've established a Differently Abled Friends and Allies Working Group. We've increased our use of task groups and working groups to create more flexible opportunities to serve. We've established Whisper Buddies to support Friends who are new to our gatherings.

The Liaison Committee recommends that all of us continue to educate ourselves about inclusion through the lens of race, age, class, ability, gender, and other identities. We recommend that Friends ask themselves, consistently, how the work they are doing (and the manner in which they are doing it) supports our becoming a more actively inclusive faith community. And we recommend that Friends hold in discernment a recent minute from the Witness Coordinating Committee:

“Our Creator calls for us all to treat each other with justice and equality. Following our testimonies and leadings of Spirit, we therefore affirm that NYYM must consider all budgets and policy decisions through a lens that looks at structural racism and our leading to become an anti-racist and multi-cultural faith community.”