

**NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING**  
**Priorities Working Group**

**REPORT TO SPRING SESSIONS 2013**

Since Fall Sessions, the Priorities Working Group has continued to carry out its charge from two years ago, “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.” Today we tell you our present insights into New York Yearly Meeting’s priorities. Since our last report, at Fall Sessions in November, we have met with thirteen more meetings: Orchard Park, Kendal-on-Hudson, Manasquan, Saranac Lake, Chatham-Summit, Bulls Head, Albany, Schenectady, Manhasset, Fifteenth Street, Morningside, Manhattan, and Westbury. We have also been asked about visits to prison worship groups. So far we have visited three, Auburn, Cayuga and Sing Sing. In all visits we focus on three queries: First, How is the Spirit alive in your Monthly Meeting? Second, What work, ministry, witness is your Meeting called to? And third, What work do you feel God is calling New York Yearly Meeting to do? These queries are as useful to us as they were when they were used at the recent Meeting for Discernment. In our meeting visits, we spend most of the time listening to local Friends. We are as likely to hear things like “We want to partner with Chewele YM in Kenya as well as New York Yearly Meeting” as we are to hear, “Because of our geographical location, most of our focus is local.”

- When we ask the first question, “Where is the Life in your Meeting; what ministry and witness are your Meeting and individual Friends engaged in?” we hear again and again that Friends’ priority is their involvement with the spiritual community of their local Meeting, from which Friends derive their primary sustenance. Although for some Friends, the meeting is subordinate to other activities, many tell us that their meeting is central to their lives. Gathering on First Day is an opportunity to be enriched by spirit and receive the support of other Friends. Also, in some meetings, the life is felt to center on children and First Day School. In others (I quote from one meeting), “the meeting provides spiritual support for Friends doing work outside the meeting, and then they in turn bring those experiences back to meeting, enriching them all.” Nurturing our local meeting is a top spiritual priority for many of us.

I’ll come to our second query in a moment. Our third query, “What are your hopes, expectations and leadings for our Yearly Meeting as a whole? What work is God calling our Yearly Meeting to do?” brings us back to the first one. Friends want those who are led to be active in New York Yearly Meeting to connect more meaningfully with monthly meetings and individual Friends. This theme has been sounded many times in our visits. The expectation is that the Yearly Meeting’s activities should be either in support of, or on behalf of, the monthly meetings, and not unconnected with meetings’ spiritual condition and leadings. As stated at a visioning exercise held at Coordinating Committees’ weekend on January 25, “a yearly meeting that articulates our faith, teaches our practices of centering, aids our preparation for worship, and helps us recognize gifts in ministry.”

- Now as to the second query: when we ask, “How can the rest of the Yearly Meeting support you?” we are surprised and pleased at one answer we often get, namely what a blessing it is that Priorities Working Group Friends are there to visit. Sometimes we are told, “This meeting feels little connection to New York Yearly Meeting, and we are blessed by your visiting us.”

From these two comments we see a priority emerging. That would be to increase face-to-face contact between Friends engaged mainly in local meetings and Friends engaged in the work of the Yearly Meeting. Those who are active in New York Yearly Meeting are to connect better with monthly meetings and individual Friends. Friends want the Yearly Meeting, as a spirit-led organization, to encourage and support the kind of visitation we have been practicing, where there is more listening than telling. This theme has been sounded many times in our visits. The priority therefore is to find paths to taking away all reason to feel that our Yearly Meeting is a place far away, or that it is an event that happens once a year at Silver Bay, and remind Friends that the Yearly Meeting surrounds them as their large spiritual home. God is calling New York Yearly Meeting to become more connected with monthly meetings and individual Friends.

We have heard specific suggestions for how the Yearly Meeting can help a local meeting. One is to provide them with spiritual inspiration and shared teaching about Quakerism. We have been told that *Spark* is already a vehicle for keeping NYYM grounded in spirituality, and that the ARCH program and the Young Friends in Residence program ought to be better publicized. But very few local Friends read *Spark*, and fewer know how to take advantage of ARCH. We conclude that New York Yearly Meeting must make its presence, resources, and skills better known. Meetings are also requesting help with Quaker process, guidance in good clerking, and help with vocal ministry. They seek connection with other local Friends who have similar interests or challenges. At this time, for example, many Friends are seeking divine guidance to help them speak to the dangers of hydrofracking. Other Friends seek more practical information on such problems as the upkeep of older meetinghouses and cemeteries. Evidently the Yearly Meeting is the central body that can give advice on where to turn when looking for others with a witness concern. We are also told that the Yearly Meeting can help Friends travel in ministry. On the financial side, Friends suggest that the Yearly Meeting could aid local meetings to enable children to attend Friends schools.

The Priorities Working Group foresees a number of action items we may be considering bringing you in future sessions. First is that the Yearly Meeting offer assistance to Monthly Meetings to help them enrich their worship on fundamental spiritual topics, such as guides to good clerking, the role of afterthoughts, guidelines for vocal ministry, principles of meeting for worship with a concern for business, and how to maintain love and cohesion through periods of disagreement or conflict. Yearly Meeting activities might also be planned for locales other than Silver Bay and Powell House. Friends are more eager to attend such activities than they are able to.

A second action item is doing a better job of providing practical information of immediate use to most Monthly Meetings, such as curricula for First Day School, ARCH resources, fund-raising tools for building repairs and maintenance, cemetery upkeep, insurance, advancement, and increasing their impact on local communities through the peace testimony. New York Yearly Meeting is positioned to advertise, through radio announcements for example, who Friends are and where a Friends meeting can be found.

A third recommendation may be for the Yearly Meeting to produce clearer, more complete and more user-friendly information on the Yearly Meeting itself. The recent appointment of a communications director expands our use of electronic communication. We can

now make *Faith & Practice* current and accessible online and show updatings in it as these are approved. We can also publish more thorough and more comprehensible information about finances and staffing. Friends want to know more about the services that the Yearly Meeting treasurer, trustees and staff are dedicating to the benefit of our portion of the Religious Society of Friends. Through the Internet, the Yearly Meeting can encourage inter-meeting communications and active intervention in Quarterly and Regional events, by maintaining an inter-meeting bulletin board or listserv. Technology can help engage Friends in Yearly Meeting committees and overcome obstacles such as the time and costs of travel.

Finally, more broadly, Friends are suggesting that New York Yearly Meeting be an instigator of spirit-led change on our behalf and a spearhead for our testimonies to the larger world of Friends and indeed to the world itself. Modern communication offers global impact. The Yearly Meeting's resources can stimulate Monthly Meetings to speak our truth to the world.

We welcome your comments. Part of our charge is to reflect our insights and priorities back to our constituent regions, to ensure that we have discerned accurately. Quarterly, Half-Yearly, and other regional meetings over the next year should expect to hear from us and respond. We would also welcome more Friends to join the Priorities Working Group, which continues to be a richly rewarding service for all its members.

Lee Haring, Clerk