

NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING PRIORITIES WORKING GROUP

In this document

Report to Spring Sessions 2014	1
Statement of Leadings and Priorities—three sections:	
• General vision , in which we identify priorities in six general areas of concern.	4
• First-year actions , in which we identify actions to further these priorities over the next twelve months.	6
• Five-year goals , in which we identify actions to realize these priorities over the long term.	9
Accountability Process	11

REPORT TO SPRING SESSIONS 2014

In recognition of the difficulties the Yearly Meeting had been experiencing in achieving unity around resource allocations and how our budget process should be conducted, the Body of Friends gathered at Spring Sessions in 2011 approved a process “to discern accurately and corporately what work God would have us do.” The Body agreed that “the product of this discernment process, presented as a Statement of Leadings and Priorities, will become - upon approval - the priorities of New York Yearly Meeting as a community for the ensuing four to six years,” and that the Statement “will be utilized in preparing budgets, staff work plans, and other services and initiatives of the Yearly Meeting and its committees and constituent parts.” (Minute 2011-4-33.)

To guide the process of discerning priorities, the Body named an *ad hoc* working group - The Priorities Working Group - and charged the Working Group with responsibility, 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.” (Minute 2011-4-35.) In fulfilling this charge, the Working Group has met with 78 monthly, regional and quarterly meetings and worship groups and followed up each visit with a written report confirming the meeting’s or group’s insights and concerns. The Priorities Working Group then further reflected back to all the Quarterly, Regional and Half-Yearly Meetings our understanding of the messages we had heard in visiting virtually all of our worshipping communities.

The Working Group also was charged with responsibility “to distill those insights and discern from them a proposed Statement of Leadings and Priorities that is both prophetic and workable.” (Minute 2011-4-35.) At each Yearly Meeting session over the past year, the Working Group has reported to the Body the budding fruits of this charge to discern where the Spirit may be leading us as a society of Friends in the immediate future. Those reports spoke about the

disconnect many Friends feel between, on the one hand, the concerns of themselves and their monthly and regional meetings and, on the other hand, the work that is undertaken by the Yearly Meeting. The reports noted that this disconnect inhibits the best functioning of the Yearly Meeting and highlighted the consequent need to realign our Yearly Meeting to be more responsive to the priorities and leadings of the monthly meetings. The reports also identified some of the work currently being undertaken by Yearly Meeting staff, committees and volunteers that is valued and appreciated by our monthly meetings and Friends, such as visits from staff, attention to our youth by the Young Adult Field Secretary and Powell House, the ARCH program, communications through *Spark* and *Infoshare*, and Conflict Transformation Committee programs.

The Working Group's prior reports identified areas and ways in which the Yearly Meeting can better serve our community of meetings and Friends. These consist of focusing the Yearly Meeting on (1) programs to teach and share our spiritual skills with each other, and to help meetings to revitalize themselves; (2) programs to help sustain our monthly meetings financially and to increase membership; (3) activities to increase contact and spiritual relationship among Friends; (4) resources to assist meetings in teaching our children, youth and young adults the substance of our faith and practice, and actions to better integrate them into the fabric of our community; and (5) the responsibility of the Yearly Meeting to be an active voice for Friends' faith, values, ministry and witness in the world.

The Working Group also has reported that, in order to rebuild our beloved community, the Yearly Meeting needs to be transparent in its operations and accountable to its members. The Working Group has offered suggestions on ways to open up the Yearly Meeting's budget setting process. At Fall Sessions of 2013, a sample consolidated financial statement that is intended to make more transparent the income and expenses of the entire Yearly Meeting was shared with the Body.

Finally, the Working Group was charged with responsibility "to design a process to assess the implementation of these priorities." (Minute 2011-4-35.) At Fall Sessions, the Group reported that it had begun approaching these questions by meeting in worship, seeking the guidance of the Spirit. That process has continued. The Group has made progress and hopes to find unity in the near future (God willing).

Throughout this work, the Working Group has been blessed by the welcoming reception tendered by Friends, by Friends' trust and willingness to share deeply their hopes, fears, leadings and needs, and by Friends' steady accompaniment and sound advice in this journey. The Group continues to receive invaluable insights and concerns of Friends and meetings, and continues to labor with discerning "accurately and corporately what work God would have us do" as a gathered Body of Friends.

Today, the Priorities Working Group offers Friends the accompanying proposed Statement of Leadings and Priorities for ultimate approval at Summer Sessions 2014. Friends are invited to sit with this proposed Statement, to test the leadings and priorities for truthfulness, to share them with our meetings in worship and in business sessions, and to reflect back the ways in which the Statement succeeds and falls short in expressing our hopes and dreams for a beloved community.

Priorities Working Group:

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STATEMENT OF LEADINGS AND PRIORITIES

**We Envision A Yearly Meeting Deeply Grounded In The Practice Of Our Faith.
We Envision A Yearly Meeting Made Up Of Strong, Vital Monthly Meetings.
We Envision A Yearly Meeting Gathered Together Into One Body.
We Envision A Yearly Meeting That Nurtures Our Children, Youth, And Young Adults.
We Envision A Yearly Meeting That Witnesses To The World On Our Behalf.
We Envision A Yearly Meeting That Is Accountable and Transparent.**

The Religious Society of Friends in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut, gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, seeks to “dwell in the cool, sweet, holy power of God.” (*George Fox, Letters.*) In corporate worship and discernment, we have listened for the guidance of the Living Spirit that we may experience the Lord’s love and enrich our faith. We have found Truth in these Leadings and Priorities as a Statement of “how the Spirit is at work among us and where it is leading us as a society of Friends in the immediate future.” (NYYM Minute 2011-4-35.)

Our Faith and Practice (at pages 102-103) describes the function of the Yearly Meeting, in part, as follows: “The yearly meeting comprises the entire membership of constituent monthly meetings, all of whom share in its deliberations.... The yearly meeting exists principally to worship together.... [I]t can engage in any activity or foster any work that the membership considers appropriate.... Through pooling efforts and resources, the yearly meeting can consider wider and more varied concerns.... The yearly meeting should inspire and support its constituent meetings, broaden their awareness of other Friends’ concerns, and help them develop their own concerns.”

We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, re-affirm these purposes of our Yearly Meeting and, guided by the expressed leadings and aspirations of our monthly meetings, adopt the following Statement of Leadings and Priorities for our Yearly Meeting.

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.

Priority: 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.

Priority: 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.

Priority: 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 on passing on to them the substance of our faith and practice.

Priority: We, the Body of Friends gathered through our New York Yearly Meeting, recognize as a Priority for the Yearly Meeting assisting Meetings with developing First Day School curricula, building skills for working with our teens, helping rejuvenate First Day Schools, and providing support for parents of young children.

We Envision A Yearly Meeting that Witnesses to the World on Our Behalf

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. The Yearly Meeting can and should speak loudly, yet faithfully, for all Friends.

Priority: 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.

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.

Priority: 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.

Implementing the Priorities

FIRST YEAR ACTIONS

While particular committees may be well-suited for pursuing parts of this vision, these are the Priorities of the Yearly Meeting as a whole. They 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. If Friends are not led to execute these Leadings and Priorities, they simply will not happen. We are called to work together to make this vision a reality.

[NOTE: In distributing the draft Statement of Leadings and Priorities at Spring Sessions, Priorities Working Group is inviting Friends to sit with this proposed Statement, to share it with our meetings in worship and in business sessions, to test the leadings and priorities for truthfulness and to reflect back the ways in which the Statement succeeds and falls short in expressing our hopes and dreams for a beloved community. The Statement of Leadings and Priorities will be considered for approval at Summer Sessions. Priorities Working Group intends this period of testing and reflecting until Summer Sessions as an opportunity for Friends to give measured attention to the proposed Statement of Leadings and Priorities and, in particular to the First Year Actions described below, to discern whether they will further our vision of a gathered Yearly Meeting and, if so, to embrace working together to make them a reality.]

We Envision A Yearly Meeting Deeply Grounded in the Practice of Our Faith

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- The Spiritual Nurture Working Group will complete its vetted list of Friends offering workshops which nurture the life of our monthly meetings and will have it added to the Yearly Meeting web site for monthly meetings to use.
- Nurture Coordinating Committee will offer at least two half-day clerking workshops in diverse locations for all clerks and other interested Friends.
- The General Secretary will offer programs on spiritual deepening to at least five monthly meetings.

We Envision A Yearly Meeting Made Up of Strong, Vital Monthly Meetings

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- The Associate Secretary will make herself particularly available to support monthly meeting Advancement and Outreach committees and to promote Quaker Quest.
- General Services Coordinating Committee will appoint a group to determine the need for monthly meeting assistance with insurance cost and coverage and to assess potential savings through creating an insurance pool.
- Development Committee will offer consultation on fund raising to all monthly meetings which request it.
- The Communications Director will set up a list-serve on cemetery maintenance as a pilot and will assess how helpful Friends find this to be.
- Advancement Committee will sponsor “Bring a Friend to Meeting” campaign.

We Envision A Yearly Meeting Gathered Together into One Body

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- Friends will make at least 100 visits to monthly meetings and worship groups.
- The Spiritual Nurture Working Group will sponsor a pilot program for a regionally-based spiritual formation program in one region.
- We will maintain our current practice of making staff visits to monthly meetings a high priority.

**We Envision A Yearly Meeting
that Nurtures Our Children, Youth, and Young Adults**

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- Nurture Coordinating Committee and Youth Committee will appoint a group to collect and develop first day school materials and to distribute them to monthly meetings as requested.
- This same group will collect suggestions for a one-time First Day School program for children who show up unexpectedly at a monthly meeting and will publish these on the YM website.
- The Communications Director will create a list-serve for First Day School leaders so Friends can seek help from other Friends with expertise.
- Personnel Committee will work with interested Friends to develop a job description and funding strategy for a part-time staff position to support monthly meetings in their nurture of children and youth.
- Sessions and Junior Yearly Meeting will continue to work with regional planning committees to ensure programs for children and youth at Spring and Fall Sessions which integrate these Friends into our community and our common work.

**We Envision A Yearly Meeting
that Witnesses to the World on Our Behalf**

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- We will clarify the authority of the YM Clerk and General Secretary to speak and act in our name between YM Sessions.
- We will make 3 public advocacy visits to governmental officials in Albany regarding issues of concern to Friends.
- We will actively participate in inter-faith organizations that work to influence public policy, such as state Councils of Churches, and the National Religious Campaign Against Torture.
- The General Secretary and other Friends chosen by the Prisons Committee will meet with NYS Department of Correctional Services to advocate for the right of full religious expression for incarcerated Friends.

We Envision A Yearly Meeting that Is Accountable and Transparent

We will begin to implement this Priority by undertaking the following actions during the next 12 months:

- The Yearly Meeting body will authorize a committee named to shepherd the implementation of the Leadings and Priorities and to provide ongoing assessments of progress in realizing our vision.
- Our Communications Director will ensure that meetings and Friends are regularly provided with detailed information about the work of the Yearly Meeting and the implementation of the Leadings and Priorities through Spark, InfoShare, the Yearbook, the YM website and social media.
- Financial Services Committee will publish a consolidated financial statement that makes more transparent the income and expenses of the entire Yearly Meeting will be published.
- Financial Services Committee will work with Liaison Committee to finalize a schedule and process for developing YM budgets that affords meetings and Friends abundant and meaningful opportunity to participate in discerning how monies will be allocated.
- YM representatives to Friends organizations will make it a priority to report to meetings and Friends about the ongoing work and concerns of those organizations.
- The YM clerk will publish and distribute, at least two months in advance, information about substantive items to be considered at the upcoming yearly meeting session, whenever possible.

Implementing the Priorities:

FIVE YEAR VISION

In approving this Statement of Leadings and Priorities, we commit to focus the energy and resources of our Yearly Meeting for the coming five years on achieving a vision of growing and vital monthly meetings which are open and loving communities, effective in their outreach, active in the world, and skillful in nurturing the spiritual lives of Friends of all ages. We envision a yearly meeting structure which is devoted to furthering this vision, is an effective focal point for organizing our collective work in the world, and which communicates that work broadly. We envision a yearly meeting structure which is accountable to these priorities, transparent in its finances and integrally connected to the monthly meetings it represents and supports. We envision a yearly meeting where there will no longer be “yearly meeting Friends” and “monthly meeting Friends,” but rather one, whole yearly meeting devoted to faithfully living out the leadings of the Spirit. We reaffirm our commitment to utilize these Leading and Priorities in “preparing budgets, staff work plans, and other services and initiatives of the Yearly Meeting and its committees and constituent parts.” (Minute 2011-4-33.) We believe this vision includes the following:

A Yearly Meeting Deeply Grounded in the Practice of Our Faith

- Friends with a leading to teach and share our spiritual skills and to help meetings to revitalize themselves are supported and empowered to do so.
- Regionally based spiritual formation programs, clerking training, training in pastoral care and conflict transformation are available for all interested Friends.
- Powell House weekends are frequently held on Quaker process, practices and spiritual development, with 1/3 of the participants being under the age of 40 and with sufficient financial support provided to assure that no one is unable to participate.
- Advanced conflict transformation workshops are offered in at least two regions each year.
- Sufficient financial support is provided for gatherings to explore and share our spiritual skills and practices to assure that no one is unable participate.
- Clerking workshops are offered in at least three regions each year.

A Yearly Meeting Made Up of Strong, Vital Monthly Meetings

- Monthly meetings practice and share effective advancement and outreach techniques so that meeting membership has increased by an average of at least 10%.
- An insurance pool is available through which meetings can obtain insurance coverage at lower expense.
- NYYM provides information and other resources on best management practices for meetinghouse maintenance, cemetery maintenance, etc.
- NYYM provides information and other resources that assist monthly meetings in their fund raising efforts.

A Yearly Meeting Gathered Together into One Body

- Staff, volunteer and financial resources are focused on programs that come directly to regional and monthly meetings, such as ARCH, the Conflict Transformation Committee, programs on spiritual deepening by staff and others, “Powell House On The Road”, etc.
- Friends regularly visit one another, and the Traveling Friends Program has been revitalized.
- YM committees share their work with regions and monthly meetings through visitation.

A Yearly Meeting that Nurtures Our Children, Youth, and Young Adults

- A NYYM Children and Youth Field Secretary works with monthly meetings to nurture our children and youth.
- Our children and youth have been integrated into worship, business and communal activities at all yearly meeting sessions.
- Curricula and other teaching information and materials are shared through the NYYM website.

A Yearly Meeting that Witnesses to the World on Our Behalf

- We regularly undertake organized faith-based advocacy in Washington, DC and state capitals regarding such issues as shifting federal budget priorities away from military spending, war tax witness, sensible energy and environmental policies, prison reform.
- Our witness is amplified through participation in ecumenical advocacy groups.
- We enjoy an ongoing relationship with federal and state correctional departments that makes our voices heard on prison reform issues, such as abolishing solitary confinement, meaningful parole reform and the religious freedom of incarcerated persons.
- Yearly Meeting regularly publicizes our collective faith and work in the world, including at least three press releases a year.

A Yearly Meeting that Is Accountable and Transparent

- Friends continue to assess whether the ongoing work of the yearly meeting is true to this Statement of Leadings and Priorities, and modify it to reflect continuing revelation.
- Meetings and Friends understand and support the work and finances of the entire Yearly Meeting.
- Comprehensible consolidated financial statements are published annually.
- Meetings and Friends receive regular updates from YM representatives to Friends organizations about the ongoing work and concerns of those organizations.
- Meetings and Friends guide the YM in the development of a new Statement of Leadings and Priorities.

Accountability Process

Part of the charge to the Priorities Working Group is to “design a process to assess the implementation of these priorities.” (Minute 2011-04-35.) As well, a method to hold ourselves accountable to these priorities will help assure that they are faithfully implemented. The Priorities Working Group has been discerning in worship the possible nature and structure of a group to be charged with explicit responsibility to guide and assess the implementation of the Priorities and to integrate these broad priorities into specific line items of the Yearly Meeting’s budgets. A specific proposal (that will be presented for approval at Summer Sessions) is expected to be available for Friends’ consideration within the next month.