

Context and History of the Alternative Membership Pathways Working Group

which led to the proposal called
Membership Under the Care of New York Yearly Meeting

The Alternative Membership Pathways Working Group (AMPWG) under the care of Ministry Coordinating Committee (MCC) began out of a 2016 Summer Sessions Quakerism 101 course about the importance of membership in the Religious Society of Friends. Young Adult Friends spoke to barriers they faced in traditional membership and in response, the AMPWG was born to discern new pathways to membership within New York Yearly Meeting and beyond.

Quaker history was reviewed by the group. We learned that initially, identification as a Friend was that of a declaration of inward connection to the Light (God). Formalized membership was created in 1737 to ensure welfare was more carefully distributed to those who were an active part of the faith as well as to provide Committees for Sufferings for persecuted Friends. This formalized membership also sought to prevent ranterism, ensuring leadings could be tested and corporately discerned. Taking into account this history, the AMPWG worked to identify barriers that exist for those who are seeking to either enter Quakerism or remain within it but are isolated from or prohibited from attending regular Monthly Meetings. Some of these barriers are incarceration, schedules, differences in culture, theologies, not being understood on one's spiritual journey, scheduling, distance, and care-taking.

The working group met regularly between 2016 and 2018 and reached out to a wide variety of members and attenders both online and at many a Friends' gatherings. An AMPWG email account welcomed the diverse stories of those who had membership process successes or difficulties. An article was published in Friends Journal presenting different viewpoints towards membership with a call for stories from readers. A Powell House weekend of over 30 people later brought together representatives from three different Yearly Meetings to reflect on and re-envision membership pathways through centered worship and numerous topic explorations. AMPWG additionally facilitated a day of 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 also received feedback from the Attica Friends Worship Group and continues to explore ways that alternate pathways can more fully support incarcerated Friends. AMPWG has discerned this attached process to be a new path that we can learn from due to who applies for it and how Friends utilize it to describe their relationship with their spiritual home (even by and under utilization of this process). AMPWG will use this path as continuing revelation as we seek to ensure all Friends, especially those who are incarcerated, have a path to membership.

After this presentation, AMPWG encourages members and attenders to conduct their own discussions on membership and what types of alternative pathways could exist for people who are isolated from or prevented from regularly attending Monthly Meetings. We invite Friends to review Faith & Practice's entries on membership and see how your meeting's culture uses that guidance and what may be left unaddressed in both the text and in the proposal that follows.

The following process is the first alternative pathway put together by AMPWG, presented at both 2017 Fall and 2018 Summer sessions for approval by MCC. We welcome Friends' feedback, ideas, questions, and look forward to moving forward in discernment together about how to be more inclusive to all. Please join us in creating this path and seeing what we learn as we walk down it.