

To New York Yearly Meeting, Fall Sessions 2013
From the Priorities Working Group

Dear Friends:

[Preamble:

The Priorities Working Group was established at Spring Sessions 2011. By minute 2011-01-35, the Group was charged with responsibility in five areas:

- 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 those 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.*

This report is submitted to Fall Sessions 2013 in partial fulfillment of these charges.]

Two years ago we launched our plan to visit and listen to monthly meetings. We have reported to you about it at every session since. The visits have proceeded well. We have now visited three worship groups (Brooktondale, Philipstown, Greater Canandaigua), five prison worship groups (Cayuga, Auburn, Attica, Green Haven, Sing Sing) and fifty-three monthly meetings (we'll spare you the full list). From reporting to meetings and to each other about the visits, we have begun to reach clarity on our formal statement of leadings and priorities, which we are to bring before you in spring and summer sessions. We have also begun to identify potential changes in organization and practice that are needed to support the leadings and priorities. This report includes a first look at possible recommendations.

Changes are also needed to respond to the disconnect between monthly meetings and the rest of the Yearly Meeting. Many monthly meetings, we observe, feel detached from the rest of the Yearly Meeting. They put themselves in one category and the Yearly Meeting organization in another; they do not feel part of a "we" that is the whole of New York Yearly Meeting. Indeed, during our visits, the Priorities Working Group has been referred to as a group of "Yearly Meeting Friends," separate from local meetings and somehow different from the local meeting. This disconnect inhibits the best functioning of the Yearly Meeting. It limits the full realization of a beloved community that embraces and serves us all. Consequently, we shall recommend realigning New York Yearly Meeting, so that by addressing the priorities and leadings of the monthly meetings, Friends will rebuild that beloved community.

I. Priorities we see now

When monthly meetings speak to the Priorities Working Group, they call for two kinds of priorities: what monthly meetings want the rest of New York Yearly Meeting to do for them, and what monthly meetings want it to do that they can't do alone.

A. What would local meetings like the rest of the Yearly Meeting to do for them?

Because local Friends see us, and many of you, as belonging to the "Yearly Meeting Organization," they primarily want the organization to help them locally. They say gratefully, "You came and visited us," or "Visits are wonderful." Most of the meetings we visit wish for more contact with those they identify as "Yearly Meeting Friends." Again and again, meetings tell us that worshiping together is their priority, saying, "For many of us, worship is what holds our lives together." Friends treasure the support that their Meeting provides to members and attenders--the "love and care and support for each other," the deepening of each person through worship and spiritual growth. Spiritual deepening and spiritual learning appear to be their first priority. Hence they would like advice and information about deepening meetings for worship, perhaps by "sending Friends to deepen our worship." When they think beyond their local meeting, they ask that assistance and guidance from the broader Yearly Meeting be brought to their own regions. Several meetings want help with vocal ministry and clerking. "Spiritual leadership," said one, asking for "help learning Quaker process, practice and beliefs." They also want advice on pastoral care for members, and on resolving conflicts within a monthly meeting. Their worship would be deepened, they say, if Friends from other meetings came to visit and connect with them.

Some Friends feel God is calling New York Yearly Meeting to promote advancement, through coordinating the efforts of many monthly meetings. Other needs named by monthly meetings are (1) resources and ideas for attracting new members and retaining their young people, (2) "help with First-Day School planning; how to teach Quaker history to teenagers," and support for First Day School teachers, (3) support for pastors, (4) help with property management, and (5) help with their boards and committees.

It takes visitation, contact, and money to answer these needs. Meetings express appreciation for visits from the General Secretary, the Young Adult Field Secretary, and the Associate Secretary. Clearly, these visits are something the Yearly Meeting organization is doing well. Most of the meetings we have visited wish for more of it. One Friend welcomed the visit of the Priorities Working Group by saying it could be thought of as preparation for a meeting retreat. Meetings also praise a number of actions already being carried on, mostly by the staff. The Yearly Meeting website is being enlarged to give monthly meetings and their committees access to committee records and resource materials. News of staff activities and monthly meetings is carried in *InfoShare*, the electronic partner of *Spark*, which is a potent means for Friends to get news of other monthly meetings, Yearly Meeting activities, the wider world of Quakerism, and upcoming conferences and workshops. More Friends have begun reading both *InfoShare* and *Spark*. Monthly meeting Friends think of Powell House as a Yearly Meeting entity and often praise its benefits to youth. And the ARCH program, Friends say, "has been extraordinarily beneficial," as has the work of the Conflict Transformation Committee. In short, the Yearly Meeting, as an organization, is already carrying on activities which Friends value. Funds must be provided to keep these activities going.

B. *What would local Friends like the rest of the Yearly Meeting to do on their behalf?*

Mainly they ask for a Quaker voice in public affairs, to the Council of Churches in each state, to state legislatures, to the governors' offices, to the world. No monthly meeting can speak for "all Friends," but the Yearly Meeting can get media attention for Quaker concerns. Friends ask for a louder voice for their peace witness, earthcare, social justice, income inequality, and prison concerns. Friends also hope that this Yearly Meeting, being one of the few that belong to both Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting, will maintain its working memberships in both. They urge the Yearly Meeting to advise Friends Committee on National Legislation, American Friends Service Committee, Friends World Committee for Consultation, and other Friends organizations, and to receive and pass back their information to local meetings by sharing it on *InfoShare*. Generally, Friends want the Yearly Meeting organization to raise public awareness about Quakers in the wider world; to proclaim our spiritual vision and display our spiritually based activism on issues in the world; even to provide a clear statement of our faith. These activities also require funding.

II. Our possible recommendations

The Priorities Working Group was charged to "design a process to assess the implementation of these priorities" (minute 2011-04-35). We are seeking unity on how to fulfill this charge--that is, how far to go toward designing implementation. We anticipate making recommendations to address both structural and procedural issues. The final content, language and scope of our recommendations, however, is still not clear to us. We are approaching these questions by meeting in worship, seeking the guidance of Spirit.

- A. We expect to recommend ways that the Yearly Meeting organization can be in more frequent and more direct contact with the monthly meetings it serves, expecting to be accountable to them.
- B. We expect to recommend, as an efficient way of removing the sense of distance between monthly meetings and the Yearly Meeting organization, to involve more Friends in the budget-making process. We have agreed that the budget-setting process should begin early each year, at the Coordinating Weekend, in a Spirit-guided manner, and be fully developed by Fall Sessions.
- C. One of our Advices directs Friends to inspect frequently the state of their temporal affairs. Following that Advice, we expect also to recommend that statements of Yearly Meeting income and expense should be easily accessible to all who contribute to its work. Budget statements should transparently reflect the activities of the organization, the cost of major initiatives, the achievements of the various programs, and the way that local Friends can become engaged in them. We have been working with the Financial Services Committee and the Treasurer to make ready a consolidated statement of the Yearly Meeting's finances. Today we are distributing to you a sample of such a statement. It is intended to help Friends understand better the income and expense cash flow of New York Yearly Meeting. Thereby, more Friends will carry out more of our financial planning, more effectively and efficiently, to ensure that we direct our funds to answer the spiritual leadings and priorities of the monthly meetings.

- D. Finally, we ask: what should be laid down? Based on what we have heard in our visits to this point, the short answer is: Everything that doesn't benefit monthly meetings or act on their behalf. We shall be testing this answer as we complete our process and prepare for our final report to Summer Sessions 2014. We are questioning whether our current structure contributes to the sense of disconnection between our monthly meetings and the Yearly Meeting organization. We seek to create a unified body based on relationship, transparency, and accountability. We are in discernment as to what changes that may necessitate in our structure.

Lee Haring, Clerk
Priorities Working Group