

Meetings for Discernment Steering Committee Report to Spring Sessions 2011

History: The Meetings for Discernment were established in 2007 as a new body with three charges: to help strengthen connections between monthly meetings and the Yearly Meeting; to support individual leadings; and to help discern emerging directions within the Yearly Meeting. It was envisioned that monthly meetings would appoint one or two seasoned Friends to serve on this body, which would gather for extended worship two or more times each year, for at least a full day. A steering committee was created to do the necessary work of planning for, and reporting on, each session. The Transition Working Group Advanced Report set out that the Meetings for Discernment would:

- Serve as a two-way conduit, weaving together the work of Friends at every level, from the monthly meeting through the Yearly Meeting
- Serve as a body to listen to what is rising at the monthly meeting level, and communicate rising issues throughout the Yearly Meeting body
- Connect the body of the Yearly Meeting through prayerful discernment
- Inform Friends working at the Yearly Meeting level how best to serve all Friends on issues that have arisen, recommending right action
- Work with issues that transcend the scope of any individual monthly meeting or Yearly Meeting section, allowing significant blocks of time to the Friends gathered so that they can labor in God's time for discernment
- Bring firm recommendations (not minutes) to appropriate Yearly Meeting committees, back to monthly meetings, or to quarterly/regional/half yearly meetings.

[from 2007–2008 *Yearbook*: Transition Working Group Advanced Report, pp 53–56 & Minute 2007-07-38]

The steering committee finds that the Meetings for Discernment are fulfilling many of the functions set by these charges. The Meetings have been embraced by a substantial part of the yearly meeting; they continue to grow and evolve; and we believe that they should be continued beyond July 2011. We are not seeking approval now. We intend to bring recommendations to Summer Sessions for an ongoing body, including a description of its form and its relationship with monthly meetings and with the yearly meeting structure.

Extended worship at least twice a year weaving together the work of Friends: Meetings for Discernment have been held twice each year since 2008, once in the winter at a meetinghouse able to accommodate 100 or more attendees and once during a day at Summer Sessions. The winter meetings have been held in different regions: at Rochester, Poughkeepsie, Purchase, and Plainfield. Each drew together local Friends as well as Friends from afar; Friends who are active on yearly meeting committees as well as Friends who do not generally participate in yearly meeting functions.

Connecting through prayerful discernment: The Meetings for Discernment call for longer and more disciplined attention to our *corporate* condition than we are used to in open waiting worship. They call for deeper listening and more careful Spirit-led discernment before speaking than we

practice in worship sharing. We find this has made a difference to our worship, to our committee work and to our business sessions – at our home meetings, our regional meetings and the yearly meeting.

Building a Web of connections between meetings: The Meetings for Discernment have provided opportunities for Friends to hear what other monthly meetings and worship groups are doing, to bear the burdens of those that are struggling and to learn from those who are growing. Regular attendees have gained a sense of the life of individual meetings: we have experienced the joy of hearing from meetings that had faced great challenges, then hearing that those challenges had been met, and that past requests for prayer had been answered.

During lunch breaks and after, we have seen Friends seek each other out to learn more from one another. We have heard of Meetings who were inspired to try out or modify processes that they learned about in Meetings for Discernment, and of other Meetings intending to reach out more to their neighbors. Such connections are powerful. Meetings realize that they are not alone, that their challenges have been encountered and overcome by others, and that there is a broader community which can support them in the life of their meeting. This is what being an extended community is all about.

Strengthening connections between monthly meetings & the yearly meeting: After the first Meetings for Discernment, the steering committee was able to lift up concerns, but not to make recommendations. Although clear naming of a concern is an important step in discernment, the expectation that these meetings would bring greater integration of the concerns in local meetings with the work of Yearly Meeting committees was not quickly realized. As members of the steering committee have gained experience of the Meetings for Discernment, we have been able to find queries that are alive to those who attend and that connect to the work of the Yearly Meeting. After the Meeting at Plainfield, the steering committee was able to make some clear recommendations to yearly meeting committees for the first time.

Supporting individual leadings: So far, the leadings that have been nurtured most are those of eldering and vocal ministry. We have been blessed by Friends answering the call to hold the meeting in prayer. Through their practice at Meeting for Discernment, these Friends are recovering the essence of what it means to serve as an elder and are coming together to support one another in the development of these rediscovered spiritual gifts. Friends with gifts in vocal ministry have reported that they have found the Meeting for Discernment has deepened and strengthened their ministry to the benefit of the meetings in which they participate.

Discerning emerging directions within the Yearly Meeting: This is something we expect to be more purposeful about in the future. We believe that through the intentional practice of deep, corporate listening at Meetings for Discernment we are becoming better able to discern the presence, the movement,

and the call of God, Spirit, Light in our hearts, in the lives of our monthly & regional meetings, in our yearly meeting as a whole, and in the wider world.

Minutes of concern: Although it was suggested in Minute 2007-07-38 that the Meetings for Discernment should consider minutes from monthly and regional meetings that reflect their concerns, this has not worked out. The Meetings for Discernment are not a decisionmaking body, and the steering committee recommends that minutes of concern from monthly meetings are best addressed elsewhere.

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