

**Report of the Priorities Working Group to New York Yearly Meeting
Spring Sessions
April 2015
Oakwood School, Poughkeepsie, NY**

We bring to Spring Sessions a revised proposal for minutes to complete the work we were given/assigned when Yearly Meeting met for Spring Sessions in 2011 here at Oakwood. These minutes address implementing the Statement of Leading and Priorities that was adopted last summer (Minutes 2014-07-31) and assessing that implementation. We read a first draft at Fall Sessions in November 2014, and the working group asked “that everyone read and sit with the two sets of proposed minutes in their entirety, share them with your meetings and engage one another and the PWG in considering how these recommended actions can serve the needs of all parts of the Yearly Meeting.”

Since November, we have received comments in writing and in person on the proposed Implementation and Assessment Minutes (“I & A Minutes”). The version we bring back to you reflects our further discernment in light of the suggestions and concerns we heard from Friends.

Explanation of Revisions:

Throughout the revised draft of the I & A Minutes, we tried to make the language clearer, simpler and more direct. We also eliminated quotations from previous minutes, as they interrupted the flow of the document without materially contributing to understanding the purposes of the proposed Minutes.

Implementation Minutes:

1. In the implementation minutes, hortatory language (for example, “We commend all Friends’ attention to the Leadings and Priorities...”) has been replaced with more clear direction (ex., “All in service to the Yearly Meeting will be guided by the Leadings and Priorities...”).
2. We revised item # 2 and deleted item # 5 in order to eliminate a specific direction to Financial Services Committee to actively include the regional meeting treasurers in its work, and replaced that direction with a request to FSC to “seek to include regional and monthly meeting treasurers in its discernment.” The original minute had called for the participation of the regional treasurers as a mechanism for keeping the concerns of the *monthly meetings* in the forefront of the budgeting process. Friends reminded us that, while regional meeting treasurers in the past may have been well-acquainted with the financial concerns of the monthly meetings in their regions, this is no longer a reliable assumption. The revision broadens FSC’s consideration to include both regional and monthly meeting treasurers, but leaves

the methods for seeking their input to FSC to determine.

3. We revised item # 4 to include fundraising so that all financial planning and activities of the Yearly Meeting are coordinated through Financial Services Committee. We also eliminated a reference to a specific committee to make clear that the direction to coordinate with FSC applies to all groups and persons in the Yearly Meeting. Finally, please note that the direction to coordinate financial responsibilities with FSC will not apply to the administration of restricted funds (“to the extent consistent with the directions and limits of any gifts or trust instruments”) so that we will continue to honor the wishes of historical donors.

Assessment Minute:

A frequent response to the proposal to create a Priorities Assessment Committee (“PAC”) was, “why do we need another committee?”; “why can’t this work be handled by an already existing committee?”. Some Friends also questioned the point of creating a committee with “no teeth”; *i.e.* a committee that lacked enforcement authority.

The Priorities Working Group concluded that a group to serve as the “eyes and ears” of the Yearly Meeting, but not the “enforcer”, was most appropriate and that no currently existing committee could serve this role. Our reasons for proposing this new committee include the following:

1. First, in 2011 the Yearly Meeting Body directed PWG “to design a process to assess the implementation of these priorities.” (Minute 2011-04-35)

2. Assessing implementation serves the invaluable purpose of keeping us faithful to our decisions. The Yearly Meeting has undertaken revitalization projects a number of times. Each of these projects produced insightful and well-received recommendations for fulfilling our revitalization goals. Too frequently, however, we moved on without implementing many or any of the recommendations. As a result, many Friends developed a sense that our revitalization efforts are doomed to failure because of inadequate, long-term attention to their faithful implementation. In creating the Priorities Working Group, Friends were determined to break this cycle of preparing visionary revitalization reports and then over time forgetting or ignoring their recommendations. We discerned that, in order to facilitate implementation over a number of years, we would benefit from a mechanism to regularly remind us and keep us focused on our commitment. Hence, a Priorities Assessment Committee.

3. Revitalization efforts are unsettling and frequently difficult because they disrupt and displace long-standing habits, customs and traditional ways of doing things. Over time, we tend to revert to comfortable behaviors and focus. A

group with on-going responsibility to monitor and report on our progress in implementing revolutionary changes, and to remind us and advise us if we stray, can help us remain faithful to carrying out our commitments.

4. The primary goal in undertaking the process of, first, developing priorities and, now, implementing them was, and continues to be, to bring the Yearly Meeting back to its most basic responsibilities of serving monthly and regional meetings and Friends' worship, witness and ministry in their home communities. Currently, there is no Yearly Meeting group, officer or employee which or who is primarily focused on this goal. The proposed PAC can help maintain and deepen these connections. It can help achieve the accountability and transparency needed to assure that all our Yearly Meeting resource allocation decisions – whether they be about budgets, staff, volunteer activity or other “treasure” – will be firmly rooted in the priorities of the monthly meetings.

5. We have long used practices to oversee and guide our decisions and actions and to counsel Friends under the weight of a leading. Oversight and clearness committees, ministry and counsel, elders and overseers all serve in this nurturing, supporting and advising role. The Yearly Meeting is under the weight of an imposing leading, our approved Statement of Leadings and Priorities. We should do no less for ourselves as a Body than we do for ourselves as individuals grappling with leadings and seeking to “find the guidance of the Spirit.” (Faith and Practice, p. 27) PWG believes that creating a new committee devoted solely to assisting us in implementing our priorities can provide immeasurable benefits in helping us remain disciplined and faithful.

6. The PAC is structured to consist of Friends whose primary, and perhaps only, service to the Yearly Meeting will be their work on this committee. And the committee will include Friends, perhaps even a majority of Friends, recommended by the regional meetings, who should be closer to the joys, concerns and conditions of the monthly meetings. In these ways, the PAC is expected to reflect greater objectivity about Yearly Meeting activities than normally expected for Yearly Meeting committees and substantial awareness of the needs and desires of the monthly meetings. This is a relatively unique set of characteristics for a Yearly Meeting committee and, in some ways, mirrors the composition of the Priorities Working Group, which we found particularly apt for understanding the concerns and expectations of our monthly meetings.

7. The PAC will be primarily engaged in listening and observing, and then reflecting back to the Yearly Meeting the fruits of their consultations and interactions. The committee will report to the Yearly Meeting body, as well as the regional and monthly meetings, at least once a year. It will then be up to the Yearly Meeting to determine how to respond to those reports. These functions are envisioned as a deep, dynamic and ongoing process, and not a substitute for

reasoned discernment of the Body. Faith and Practice (at p. 29) counsels that “God-directed personal conduct calls for discipline in every area of our lives.” The PAC can nurture and guide the Yearly Meeting in maintaining that discipline, but ultimately decisions to adhere to or depart from our approved Statement of Leadings and Priorities must be made by all of us acting as the Body of the Yearly Meeting.

This is the 11th report from the PWG to the Body. We believe it should be our last, regardless of whether the proposed implementation and assessment minutes are approved. PWG has completed the service approved by the Body at Spring Sessions 2011. We have exhausted our energy, insights and gifts. If further work is needed for designing a process to assess the implementation of the Leadings and Priorities, others must step forward to embrace the challenge. Accordingly, with deep appreciation for the responsibilities entrusted to us by the Body, the Priorities Working Group requests that the Body approve a minute to lay down this working group.