

Local Youth Ministries Snapshot
Report to NEYM Permanent Board and Ministry & Counsel
From the Youth Ministries Committee
November 2019

Introduction

The primary purpose of the Youth Ministries Committee is to support the faith life and spiritual growth of Quaker children and youth. While our committee carries this particular concern for young Quakers, we know that the vitality of our youth ministries is inseparable from our overall health and priorities as a Religious Society. For that reason, we are sharing this brief report about local youth ministries with both the Permanent Board and Ministry & Counsel, as Friends with a commitment to the thriving of the Quaker Movement in New England overall.

We all know that our local youth ministries, including First Day Schools, are a central part of our local meeting communities, yet they are all too often out of view to adult Friends without young children. We hope that our committee's new practice of visiting with those who carry our local youth ministries, listening to their successes and challenges, and annually reporting the key take-aways of what we are hearing is of value to you in setting priorities and making decisions within your committee's own scope of work.

This is the first year of the Youth Ministries Committee embarking on the local youth ministries listening project. Janet Dawson (Northampton, MA), a Youth Ministries Committee member, accepted the role of Project Leader, working closely with Nia Thomas (NEYM Staff). Janet's service was supported by a modest stipend. In this role, Janet visited nine meetings' First Day School (or equivalent) Committees and had conversations with individuals serving on these committees from twelve more meetings. Another Friend met with an additional three meetings. We prioritized visiting meetings with a larger number of children or an increasing number, based on data gathered by Beth Collea (former Religious Education Coordinator) in 2018. While perhaps the greatest benefit of these conversations was not the data collected but rather the relationships strengthened, below are some key things we heard that warrant amplifying.

Key Takeaways:

- There are many recent **successes, signs of growth, and healthy experimentation** in a number of local meetings' youth ministries. Some examples include:
 - A growing number of young attenders at a number of meetings including Hartford, Framingham, Burlington and Providence (who have recently started a new middle school group)
 - A number of First Day Schools who are being innovative in their staffing/teaching models. At Framingham and Fresh Pond, Friends are using a cooperative model where all attending parents and grandparents help with the First Day School. Worcester Meeting has recruited about 5 new teachers.
 - In a number of meetings, teachers are trying new approaches, driven by children's interests. At Storrs, adults and children worked together to design a board game about Quakerism; at Monadnock, a shared interest in gardening has guided lesson planning; at North Shore, lessons have been replaced by shared silence outdoors, with each child selecting their own "sit spot" in a near-by nature preserve.

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- The biggest challenge heard across the conversations was how **busy family schedules** are. Families feel overwhelmed and overcommitted.
- Related to busy-ness, an additional major challenge for First Day Schools and local youth groups is the **lack of consistency in attendance**. Following a curriculum, building a cohesive cohort, and planning for particular ages or needs on a given week are nearly impossible for many of our meetings. Teachers need to be able to think on their feet and change plans the moment they see who actual turns up.
- Within these inconsistent groups of youth, there is also often a **wide range of ages** which is an additional planning challenge.
- A number of meetings are **utilizing NEYM's background screening service**.
- Meetings continue to see **most older youth stop attending in the middle school years** and they wonder about effective ways to maintain meaningful connection despite lack of regular attendance. Many adult Friends do not engage with children and teens, yet youth connections with adults other than their parents are critical to their sense of belonging and faith formation. We all need to interact with Friends of all ages.
- Many religious educators/youth workers are parents themselves and are struggling with **burnout** in their meeting role.
- A number of meetings are wrestling with the question of **if they should hire paid staff** to run their First Day School or youth group. YMC will explore if there is a way we can help connect Friends exploring this with meetings which have already walked this path.
- Across meetings, we heard **growing interest in multi-generational activities and spaces** and ways to engage children and youth outside of the First Day School classroom. Friends are curious what other meetings are doing that works in terms of all ages worship, service, learning, and fellowship. There is desire for children and youth to feel connected to the meeting as a whole, and these relationships take time, openness to new structures, and intentionality.
- Many meetings find it valuable to have a wide variety in the adults who teach and work with children and youth so that more than just a few individuals build relationships with youth. When is the last time you spent your Sunday in the kids' room?
- Local meeting youth/First Day School committee members **yearn to connect with and learn from others in similar roles** at other meetings in ways that don't require much additional time. In response to this need, we are experimenting with a Facebook group for New England Friends serving in this way and have been encouraging participation in the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative, which offers monthly opportunities for remote (Zoom) connection on varying topics. Paying attention to this need will be a major priority for YMC in the coming year.
- Many religious educators are seeking a simpler way to find lesson plans ("one stop shopping") because they do not have the time to "wade through" lots of options. YMC is working on a short list of flexible but simple lesson plans that meetings can use with minimal preparation.

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- There are a number of First Day School teachers who would like to teach about the Bible and God but are finding that they get **push back from some parents who are not comfortable with religious language** and that their wider meeting community is not adequately responding to the resulting conflict.
- Some religious educators are new to Quakerism and isolated. As a result, they **do not have a sense of the wider Quaker world**.
- There is specific interest in learning the **Faith & Play** curriculum. YMC is in the initial phases of hosting a future training.
- There is interest in some meetings in **potentially reviving the regional youth groups** (such as the Boston Area Quaker Youth Group) in order to better connect area teens with each other.
- There is a **variety in how pro-actively meetings encourage participation in NEYM youth programs**. Some meetings have funds for their youth to attend retreat or camp and help with transportation. In other meetings, the financial and logistical burden is solely on parents. **Attending an NEYM youth retreat is a big leap for families**. Newcomers only try out retreats when encouragement happens within the context of an on-going relationship.
- For a number of families already engaged in our retreat programs, Sessions is a draw, but for families who have not yet participated in this way, **we need to do a better job clarify why participation at Sessions is compelling for families**.
- We also believe it's important to share that **some meetings did not respond** to our offer to connect even after multiple attempts with multiple points of contact. There is either a lack of interest in relationship with NEYM or a lack of capacity to maintain the relationship.
- There is a lot of communication from NEYM to local meetings and, with Friends rotating between roles, much can get lost in the shuffle. **The most effective mode of communication is within the context of personal relationship with an emphasis on listening**.
- Our meetings are **not “one size fits all”**; while there are trends that cut across difference, it would be a mistake to assume that a “solution” for one meeting would work for all. Each meeting’s journey has unique aspects.

Questions for reflection:

1. *What, if any, of this information was new or surprising to you?*
2. *How might these trends inform your committee’s priorities in the coming year?*
3. *From your perspective, what are vital points of connection to for Youth Ministries Committee to maintain in the coming year?*