



NEW ENGLAND
YEARLY MEETING
— OF FRIENDS —
QUAKERS

September 5, 2019

Friends, I am writing today as your new presiding clerk of the Yearly Meeting. While I know many of you already, I look forward to visiting more meetings and connecting with more of you over the next 3 years. I write today to share news about some decisions discerned at this year's Annual Sessions regarding our relationship with Friends United Meeting (FUM). Monthly meetings which have chosen to withhold funds designated for FUM will be particularly affected. I want you to know that I and others are available to meet with you, to listen, to discuss the implications of these decisions, and to help with discerning way forward.

As some of you may be aware, for the last 10 years New England Yearly Meeting has had a mechanism which enabled monthly meetings to withhold the percentage of their contributions to NEYM which would have gone to FUM. While many Friends in New England believe in the work that FUM does, others, as a matter of conscience, cannot accept donating to an organization whose personnel policy does not allow gays and lesbians to work for them. This mechanism, created when no other way forward could be found, was intended to be a "temporary solution," allowing us time to reflect and discern how God was leading us regarding our relationship with FUM. If you are not familiar with the history of the withholding policy, this presentation by Honor Woodrow (M&C clerk) and Callid Keefe-Perry (M&C member) is worth reviewing: bit.ly/FUM-policy.

Attached to this letter are the pertinent minutes and my own summary of the discernment. I have tried to capture the wide variety of views that were expressed. I do want to celebrate that those gathered at Sessions this year affirmed that "*every person* is deeply beloved in the eyes of God," and that "We are clear that the FUM personnel policy causes harm to LGBTQ+ Friends." During the business sessions Friends were holding in tension both the truth of the harm being caused by the personnel policy and the unity of "desire to continually engage with the wide diversity of Friends worldwide." While the gathered body was unable to reach unity either on continuing the withholding mechanism or on a new policy, we recognize that this minute setting an end-date for withholding may be challenging news for meetings who have discerned to withhold. Coordinating and Advisory Committee, the group that coordinates the work of the Yearly Meeting, which I clerk, will be in touch with each meeting which has been withholding to see how we can be helpful. We could support your meeting's discernment in several directions, including how to participate in NEYM's effort to change FUM's personnel policy, how to approach budgeting without the withholding mechanism in a way that honors the conscience of Friends in your meeting, or how to draft a proposal for a new way forward as suggested by the minute of exercise.

Praying every day for Friends in New England,

Fresh Pond Monthly Meeting
Presiding Clerk, New England Yearly Meeting



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Summary by Bruce Neumann of Sessions' Consideration of the Withholding Policy

Friends gathered in Annual Sessions began this work Tuesday afternoon, with several suggestions from M&C:

- Ministry and Counsel recommended that Sessions direct the Yearly Meeting clerk to write a letter to the presiding clerk of FUM, expressing the pain and sorrow we feel in the FUM personnel policy, and recommending that the FUM governing board continue to seek a faithful alternative. Friends approved so directing the clerk.
- Ministry and Counsel recommended that Sessions request that our representatives to the FUM General Board, in consultation with representatives from other yearly meetings including those who may have different opinions from NEYM, work to develop a proposed alternative to the current policy. Friends approved.
- Ministry and Counsel also presented a minute they had received from the Racial, Social, and Economic Justice Committee, which they felt had life. (See text below)

As the clerk turned our attention to more open discernment about how we are led to proceed regarding the withholding policy, we heard many voices and points of view:

- All of us have an abiding concern for the honor and well-being of LGBTQ+ Friends, both those who are members of NEYM, and those who are members of other yearly meetings, in the U.S. and abroad. We are united in our desire for these Friends to be respected and welcomed by the organization.
- We were reminded that the landscape of gay-straight relationships in 1988 (when the policy was written) was very different, and that part of the intention of the minute was to protect gays and lesbians.
- Friends from several meetings shared that the withholding policy has enabled their meeting to stay in dialogue and relationship, which would not have been possible without this mechanism.
- We did not hear from any present Friends that they themselves were against a continuing relationship with FUM, but did hear from a number of Friends who were concerned for others in their meetings.
- Many Friends present have a deep and long-standing affection for FUM as an organization.
- We heard that, at least up to the current moment, individual Friends have made up the amount withheld, an option provided by the withholding mechanism, so that FUM received its full expected amount.
- We understand that there has been lack of clarity on the purpose of the withholding policy. While some thought that it was to allow for those who conscientiously opposed donating to FUM, others thought it was a tool to reflect our unhappiness with the policy and perhaps affect FUM.

- We heard that some members of the FUM Board understood that the policy was intended to affect their thinking about the policy, and were deeply offended that we would think that money could be used as a tool.
- While much work has been done around this issue in monthly meetings, we as a larger body have failed to do the work we committed to, which is why we find ourselves at this point.
- We heard that LGBTQ+ Friends in some other yearly meetings which do not accept their sexual orientation are deeply grateful for the presence and support of NEYM and other open and affirming meetings as a part of FUM.
- We understand that attitudes about gays and lesbians in many African nations are due at least in part to the teachings of early Quaker missionaries. While we are convinced that our current understanding is closer to the “Truth,” can we now engage in doctrine-like preaching that says “we know better now, so you should listen to us again?”
- Any attempt to change others’ opinions that is not based in humility and love will be perceived as entitlement.
- Would the energy spent on this concern be better used in caring for LGBTQ+ people worldwide whose lives are at risk because of their sexual orientation?

During our first session of discernment the clerk, Fritz Weiss, whose term has now ended, observed that while we had no unity on a new mechanism, we did not have unity on continuing the withholding mechanism. The language of the original 2009 minute indicates that, lacking unity on re-affirming the minute, the mechanism would expire. He told the body that the clerk’s team would gather that evening to reach for some shared understanding of where we stood.

This group did meet, and prepared two minutes: one naming our lack of unity and its significance (below); the other a minute of exercise, attempting to name the condition of the body. Both of these were discussed further on Wednesday. Friends were deeply exercised, many naming their concern for what terminating the withholding mechanism would mean for their meeting, others naming that they had never felt the policy had integrity, due both to the perception that we are using money as a tool for control, and to our failure to do the work as a body to understand each other and seek unity.

A listening session was called for Wednesday night which was attended by 50+ concerned Friends. One thing that was named more clearly during this discernment was that Friends longed for a new approach to the concern: How do we stay in relationship with FUM, and with each other, allowing both continued dialogue and continued relationship with Friends whose conscience does not let them contribute? The final minute (below) allows time for a new approach to emerge and be brought to Sessions next year.

Minute on FUM Withholding Mechanism

NEYM is not in unity to further extend the withholding mechanism. The mechanism was established by Minute 2009-54, which specifies that “this process is to be in force until September 30, 2010, unless explicitly extended by the YM in its Sessions next year.” It was extended several times, most recently in Minute 2014-69, which extended “the FUM financial withholding policy for the next five years, to be re-assessed no later than NEYM Sessions in

August of 2019.” Without unity on the floor of 2019 Sessions to extend it further, the mechanism ends.

Out of respect for the discernment of meetings that have approved budgets which incorporate the withholding mechanism, and in order to afford monthly meetings the time to incorporate this change into their annual budget discernment, we set the date for the expiration of this mechanism for October 1, 2020.

Minute of Exercise on NEYM’s relationship with FUM

We know that *every person* is deeply beloved in the eyes of God. We unite unequivocally in our love and care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Friends, and hold a particular concern for their lives and ministries. We continue to seek the ways we can best support these Friends in New England, around the country, and around the world.

We are clear that the FUM personnel policy causes harm to LGBTQ+ Friends, as well as all Friends who are sexually active outside of heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, the personnel policy suppresses the ministry of these Friends, causing loss to the wider body. We seek forgiveness for the extent to which we are complicit in this.

All of this we hold to be true, and yet we *also* unite in our desire to continually engage with the wide diversity of Friends worldwide. We are a part of FUM, we love FUM, and we wish to live in our community with love and integrity.

In our struggle to hold these two unities in tension, for several years we have extended a temporary withholding mechanism (see minute 2009-54) that allows individuals to know that none of their money will go to FUM.

The withholding mechanism has served a meaningful and helpful purpose. For a decade it has supported the freedom of conscience of some Friends within our Yearly Meeting, and also given us a reprieve from the tension and division that the FUM personnel policy has created in our communities. During this period, significant work was done, seeking greater unity and understanding.

As the withholding mechanism expires, we have heard any number of proposed possible mechanisms that might allow us to hold in tension both the freedom of conscience of Friends exercised by the personnel policy, and the deeply held desire to remain in community with FUM. Given our lack of unity, we are concerned that any alternative proposal drafted in haste on the floor of Sessions will not be seasoned; will not allow input from individuals not present at Sessions; and would be an obstacle to finding the opportunity that God is giving us. We hope that a properly seasoned proposal may rise through our established structures (e.g., a minute from a monthly meeting seasoned by the quarter) and be brought to Sessions 2020 before the withholding mechanism finally expires. What new opportunity, what new possibilities, are we now being called into?

As we move forward, let us listen to one another and to that of God within one another. In the words of Toni Morrison, let us “take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives.” Let us seek that greater place where God’s full measure of grace is poured out.

RSEJ Minute

Racial, Social and Economic Justice Committee asks New England Yearly Meeting to minute formally its opposition to FUM’s conditions of employment. Let us be clear, the main issue is the moral injury of the hiring policy as it stands now, not with the Yearly Meeting’s policy of withholding contributions to FUM. We value our relationship with FUM, especially the good work it has done in many countries. However, we also value the equality and inherent worth of all individuals including members of the LGBT community. LGBT people are vital to the life of our Yearly Meeting. We hold the hope that the personnel policy will evolve to include the worth of all those who seek to do God’s work in the world.