

Ministry Transition Interim report to Permanent Board

Art thou in darkness?
Mind it not, for if thou dost it will find thee more.
But stand still, act not and wait in patience
'Til light rises out of darkness and leads thee.

James Naylor

We are in the midst of an experiment, seeking to know how we, as New England Yearly Meeting, can find way forward more fully nurturing and supporting vital life and ministry in the Spirit. How can we "...consistently and joyfully expect, recognize, call out, name, and nurture gifts in ministry" [and] affirm and recognize a wide range of forms that ministry can take... ."¹

This work began with the Permanent Board Working Group to Examine Clerking Structures and Practices. Their May 2019 final report to PB, in part said "The structure and scope of Ministry and Counsel, in particular, make their work unmanageable." Their recommendation in this area was to:

- Examine the variety of tasks currently assigned to Ministry and Counsel and explore what structures would best address those needs. Allow for the possibility of distinct and complementary structures to address specific needs (for example: "Pastoral Care Resource Team").
- Establish guidelines for the membership of and service on M&C which reflect current priorities.

Out of this grew the Ministry and Spiritual Life Working Groups (also of PB). They were given the charge to "explore where and how support for ministry and spiritual life currently happens among New England Friends and offer recommendations for structures, practices and leadership roles that would best serve the current needs of Friends." This group met, consulted widely, prayed and discerned over many months. They proposed new, seasonal Meetings on Ministry and Spiritual Life and that the Committee on Ministry & Counsel be set aside in order to free up space and energy for this experiment. Permanent Board approved this proposal at their October 2020 meeting with a plan for review at Sessions 2022. Further background information and resources on this can be found on the [NEYM website](#).

These seasonal meetings, now called Gatherings for Spiritual Life and Ministry, are envisioned as having an arc, starting with looking at those factors in monthly meetings that support vibrant spiritual life, moving to the call and challenge of ministry and ending with exploration of the relationship between the local meeting and the minister.

Two of these gatherings have been held, with a third planned for April 9, 2022. The first, 'Tending the Soil of Our Monthly Meetings', was held in May 2021. Friends engaged around the ways Spirit and ministry move and are nurtured in our local meetings. Over 80 Friends, in large groups and small, worshiped, heard presentations and explored the factors supporting vibrant faith in our meetings. The second gathering, 'The Calls and Challenges of Ministry', was held in November. Five Friends

shared their faith journeys, the call they experienced and the impact living into that call has had in their lives. The gathered Friends, again 80 plus, then had opportunities to reflect on those sharings in small groups and on the resonance within their own lives and on their own sense of faithfulness and ministry. After both gatherings, Friends spoke of their gratitude for the opportunity to engage in deeply grounded conversations around ministry, faith and our Quaker community.

The third gathering is being planned as an opportunity to explore the relationship between the meeting and the minister. What are the opportunities for nurture and growth in that dynamic relationship and what are the obligations, one to the other?

The first two gatherings were fully virtual, the April gathering is being planned as a hybrid event, with the in-person portion located at Friends School of Portland.

These times of gathering, as important as they have been and as enriching as they were for those who participated, represent only a small portion of the range of ways the spiritual life and ministry of our yearly meeting needs care. It is now time to expand our focus to include those additional aspects as we seek to understand how to nurture, support, and facilitate a thriving spiritual life and ministry in our faith community.

The Ministry & Counsel committee had an impossibly large number and variety of tasks on its plate, ranging from overall care for the spiritual nurture of the yearly meeting to recruiting and organizing the microphone runners for business meetings at Sessions. Central to our work going forward will be our ability to refrain from simply jumping to re-organize those tasks and holding ourselves to the more difficult job of envisioning what is needed for a vital and active spiritual life and ministry. Only then, can we move on to the next step of discerning who and/or what can best meet those needs and what possible form that might take.

What follows is a list, areas of focus/aspects of spiritual care for New England Yearly Meeting. Some of the things on this list are specific tasks that have, in the past, fallen to the Ministry & Counsel committee, others are broader areas that may or may not have been specifically under M&C. What is missing? What is there and shouldn't be? What is in the wrong place? What needs clarification or elaboration?

It is important in considering this list to understand that it all is in the context of community as the essential locus of Quaker faith. The overall care and nurture of community is often harder to quantify but it is a critical container for our work going forward. In the end, the list may be more of a diagram of interconnected and interrelated elements.

Support for Monthly Meetings

- Consultation/support for local M&C
- Pastoral care
- Resources/Networking
- Advancement and outreach

Support for Quarters

- Consultation/support for M&C
- Recording ministers
- New monthly meetings and worship groups
- Laying down monthly meetings

Care of the whole

- Spiritual nurture
- Support & connection for ministers/ministry
- Nurture of the prophetic voice
- Support & connection for elders
- Pastoral care
- Conflict transformation
- Intervisitation
- Advancement and outreach
- Providing resources
- Religious education
 - Spiritual formation
 - First Day Schools
 - Education re Friends history/traditions
- Memorial minutes
- Travel minutes
- State of Society

Sessions

- Care of Worship
- Memorial meeting
- Elders for presenters
- Pastoral care

We need to make this framework as complete as we can, knowing, that while it is never final, a robust framing can help provide focus and direction for next steps.

Working on the framework list, I have started a virtual listening 'tour', contacting Friends to hear of their experience of the experiment thus far and gather an understanding of their vision for the care and nurture of our yearly meeting going forward. There will also be at least two group Zoom sessions for Friends who prefer that form. Please let [me](#) know if you would like either a call or to join a Zoom session.

Next will be the process of discerning how and by whom these aspects of care will be lived into. The plan is for a series of focus groups, structured opportunities for Friends to engage with these questions. We expect to bring the results of the work to this point to the Permanent Board June meeting.

In this, it will be important to free ourselves as much as possible from the ways that have happened in the past and keep ourselves as open to the promptings of the

Spirit as we can muster. We have an opportunity and it will be important to act not and be patient until the light truly rises to lead us.

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Addendum

Reflection questions for discernment

1. In this interim period since M&C was set aside and the Spiritual Life and Ministry gatherings have begun, what differences (positive or negative) have you/your meeting directly experienced? Where are the places where your meeting most needs support of the wider body?
2. Are there 'dropped stitches' or things not being attended to that were in the last five years? Said another way, are there things your meeting needs that are not available or are more difficult than they were two years ago?
3. Part of the expectation/hope was that setting aside the committee form would free up space and energy for new life. Has this been true for you and/or for your meeting?
4. What would you say would be the most effective or best way to meet your meeting's need for spiritual connection with and support from the wider Quaker community?
5. How can we, as a yearly meeting, best help support and care for the spiritual life and ministry of our faith community?
6. What, for you, are the most critical aspects of that care?
7. Do you have thoughts about how that care/support might be organized or what form it might take?
8. Did you attend one or both of the gatherings (held May 8 and Nov. 13) focused on Spiritual Life and Ministry? Did you find them useful? If you chose not to attend, can you say why?