

Pathways and Practices for Responding to Conflict in the Life and Service of New England Friends

This document seeks to 1) offer a general framing and description of dynamics of conflict as they manifest in the life of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends (NEYM); 2) clarify, summarize, and articulate current pathways and practices for responding to conflict within NEYM, and 3) offer recommendations for next steps in strengthening capacities for response to conflict.

A Framing for Understanding Conflict and Healthy Response

In all our life and service together, Friends are appropriately concerned to create conditions and promote practices that foster harmony and availability to share together in the always-available unity that we can experience in yielding to the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The effects of conflict among us, when not tended with care, can compromise our ability to experience this shared unity in our common life.

With this understanding, responding to conflicts as they arise among us is necessarily constant, ongoing, and revelatory—always a process of learning and growth. As this unfolds, attention to good practice and clear communication are vital.

A definition of conflict drawn from the discipline and practice of conflict resolution, management, and transformation (among others) that may be useful for these purposes could be: *a clash between two or more persons arising out of a difference in thought process, attitudes, understanding, interests, requirements, or perceptions.* From this perspective, conflict is endemic in human relationships. It is not always negative; wherever humans are, it simply *is*. The essential question is how we engage with conflict in order to maximize its positive (or healthy) effects and minimize its negative (or unhealthy) impacts.

As conflicts unfold, it can sometimes seem as if people and groups are “talking past each other”—as if conflict is a monolithic entity that all involved understand in the same ways. It is helpful to recognize that this is often not the case. There are many types of conflict, and many dynamics at play in any situation which we might label as “conflict.”

One simple way of describing and understanding categories of conflict in the context of groups and organizations, articulated by [Amy Gallo](#), is to distinguish four “types” of conflict: **task** (disagreement about what should be done), **process** (disagreement about how a decision should be made and carried out), **status** (disagreement about who is responsible for exercising authority or in charge of making decisions), and **relationship** (a sense of being disrespected, threatened, attacked, or wounded, often accompanied by strong emotions). The first three types often lead to and reinforce the fourth, which tends to be more potent, intractable, and harmful to individuals and to the group or organization as a whole.

Additionally, conflict manifests in our life and work together in a variety of nuanced and often overlapping ways. For example, experiences or dynamics that are experienced or described under the general framing of “conflict” may include aspects of several of the following:

- Disagreements about how particular efforts or activities of the Yearly Meeting should proceed
- Differences in understanding of facts or events, or the interpretation/narratives associated with those facts or events
- Interpersonal irritation, friction, animosity, or dislike
- Miscommunication and misunderstanding, often arising from assumptions or differences in communication or interaction styles
- Dynamics involving inappropriate exercise of power or privilege, or of the impacts of intentional or unintentional bias, discrimination, or injury
- Underlying differences in worldview, values, or theological commitments which shape our reactions and positions
- Dynamics of abuse or harassment, often masked or framed as one of the above
- Exacerbating dynamics involving the mental and emotional health of one or more parties, often framed as one of the above.

Addressing conflict shares much in common with Friends’ service that is understood in the context of pastoral care; and with the vital establishment, reinforcement, and maintenance of healthy boundaries for acceptable behavior for the good of the individual, the group, the wider body of Friends, and beyond.



The graphic above illustrates these overlapping relationships. While these three areas have much in common, the emphasis and attention of each is somewhat distinct. **Conflict transformation** seeks to decrease negative relationship dynamics or impacts, and to increase positive relationship dynamics or impacts, so that the people involved and the community as a whole can more fully thrive and grow. **Pastoral care** seeks to deepen the spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing of each person involved, thereby nurturing the life of the community. **Establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries** seeks to reduce and prevent harmful actions by any person, and to increase the agency of all involved in order to support the thriving of the community. Frameworks seeking to integrate understandings of harm and repair, or that seek to be informed by the existence and potential impacts of traumatic experiences, may inform and have implications for each of these domains of service.

Responding to conflict, and supporting the opportunities for learning and growth that it presents, should begin with an appreciation that, in Friends' experience, coming to new understandings of ourselves and others happens most deeply through the time and space to allow ourselves—and others involved—to open to God's Grace. While the changing of hearts cannot be rushed, it is important that responses to conflict be timely once there is awareness of unhealthy dynamics. Timely attention and care can prevent a worsening of conflict's effects, and foster healthier conditions in which engagement might unfold.

In all cases, except in situations involving significant power disparities, harassment, or dynamics of abusive behavior, Friends are encouraged, in keeping with the practice of gospel order articulated in Matthew 18, to begin any efforts to address conflicts by bringing a concern directly to the other person or persons, seeking learning, understanding, and restoration or strengthening of relationship whenever possible.

Generally, responses to conflict by anyone serving on behalf of the Yearly Meeting should seek first to understand, often by offering an opportunity to listen to all parties involved, and to seek to reflect and affirm their experience and perspective. In doing this, it is vital not to be seen to “take sides,” but simply to listen sympathetically and prayerfully, to seek to help a person both be and feel heard.

In situations that have not been simple to resolve, responding to conflict may be helped by a trusted third party or parties who can be present with parties in conflict to help each party to listen empathetically to each other, and to reflect to one another (often using techniques of active listening) what each person is seeking to communicate, to ensure that each party has understood the other’s point of view, even and especially if they do not agree.

Given the wide variety of contexts, people, and situations in which conflict might arise, it is important for all involved in responding to conflict to maintain flexibility in the approaches and specific actions which might be appropriate. Even so, any response to conflicts within the Yearly Meeting should emphasize, as much as possible:

1. Helping all parties feel more heard and respected;
2. Deepening mutual understanding and compassion for one another’s perspectives, even if disagreements remain;
3. Affirming the spiritual and covenantal ground which we hope undergirds our relationships with one another as Friends communities, and nurturing awareness of commonalities and shared interests;
4. Focusing shared attention on common goals in the context in which the conflict occurs;
5. Identifying steps to increase agency and a feeling of being respected on the part of all involved, and to reduce anxiety and tension, even if these steps are necessarily temporary and incomplete;
6. Taking care with the reputations of others, maintaining privacy and confidentiality wherever possible, and avoiding gossip, talebearing, nurturing misunderstandings, stoking resentments, or forming factions;
7. Taking care that those seeking to help not exacerbate conflicts, not engage in triangulation, or—with or without intention—not become additional parties to the conflicts themselves.

Current Pathways, Practices, and Responsibilities for Response to Conflict

The following are specific areas of life and service in the Yearly Meeting in which conflicts may arise, and the particular practices, expectations, policies, or parties responsible for receiving and helping to address them.

In the context of participation in activities sponsored by the Yearly Meeting:

- For more than a decade, Annual Sessions has been held in the context of a *Policy on Addressing Disruptive or At-Risk Behavior at Sessions*, which is revised annually in preparation for Annual Sessions and distributed to all Sessions attendees. It is distributed to all attendees in advance of Sessions, shared with all parties with relevant Sessions roles, posted on the Sessions website, and printed in the Guide to Sessions distributed at registration and throughout the week.

For reference, below is the Policy as implemented for Sessions 2023:

ADDRESSING AT-RISK OR DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIOR AT SESSIONS

At Sessions, we have a responsibility to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all participants. Those whose behavior disrupts program activities and/or threatens or violates the physical and emotional safety of others may be asked to leave.

Procedure:

- Disruptive behavior should be reported in confidence to one of the following people: the Clerk of Sessions Planning, the Clerk of Ministry and Counsel, the Program Director, the Teen Ministries Coordinator, the Children & Family Ministries Coordinator, the Yearly Meeting Secretary, the Sessions Pastoral Care Coordinator, or the Events Coordinator.
- The Clerk of Sessions Committee and the Yearly Meeting Secretary shall coordinate the implementation of this policy and shall be promptly advised of all incidents.
- The Yearly Meeting Secretary carries the final responsibility for safety and security at Sessions, and thus for decisions about addressing disruptive behavior.
- If disruptive behavior is reported, the Sessions Clerk and YM Secretary will determine appropriate actions, consulting with those involved as necessary.
 - If the impact of the risk or disruption is easily mitigated during Sessions, the offending party will be warned, and a plan for addressing the issues and the needs of those impacted will be made.
 - If the risk or disruption is not easily mitigated during Sessions (due to emotional or safety risk to others, the intensive follow-up needed,

- legal issues, etc.), the offending party will be asked to leave the program activity and/or Sessions.
 - o Following Annual Sessions, responsible parties (program coordinator, Sessions clerk, YM Secretary, etc.) will explore and be open to restoring relationships with those who have been asked to leave.
- Other events sponsored by the Yearly Meeting are conducted with at least a simple framework for holding appropriate boundaries, informed by the same general principles of the policy above, and the document, most recently shared with Permanent Board in 2022, providing [Pastoral Care Guidance](#) for those serving on behalf of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends.

Conflicts involving Yearly Meeting employees:

In situations in which one or more parties to a conflict (or a perceived conflict) is an employee of the Yearly Meeting, Friends are encouraged to seek to address them directly whenever possible. Concerns about conflicts not easily addressed should also be shared in a timely way with the employee's supervisor, and employees should also notify their supervisor of any significant conflicts of which they are aware. The supervisor may be a resource for mediation or seeking ways to engage other supports to resolve the matter. The Personnel Policy of the Yearly Meeting also provides for situations of conflict involving employees, both in attention to performance issues and conduct, and to potential harassment.

Consistent with the NEYM Personnel Policy, concerns related to the conduct of program staff may be shared with the Program Director (nia@neym.org). Any concerns about the conduct of staff may also always be shared with the Yearly Meeting Secretary at ymsec@neym.org. Concerns about the conduct of the Yearly Meeting Secretary should be shared with the Clerk of the Permanent Board (pbclerk@neym.org) or the Presiding Clerk (clerk@neym.org).

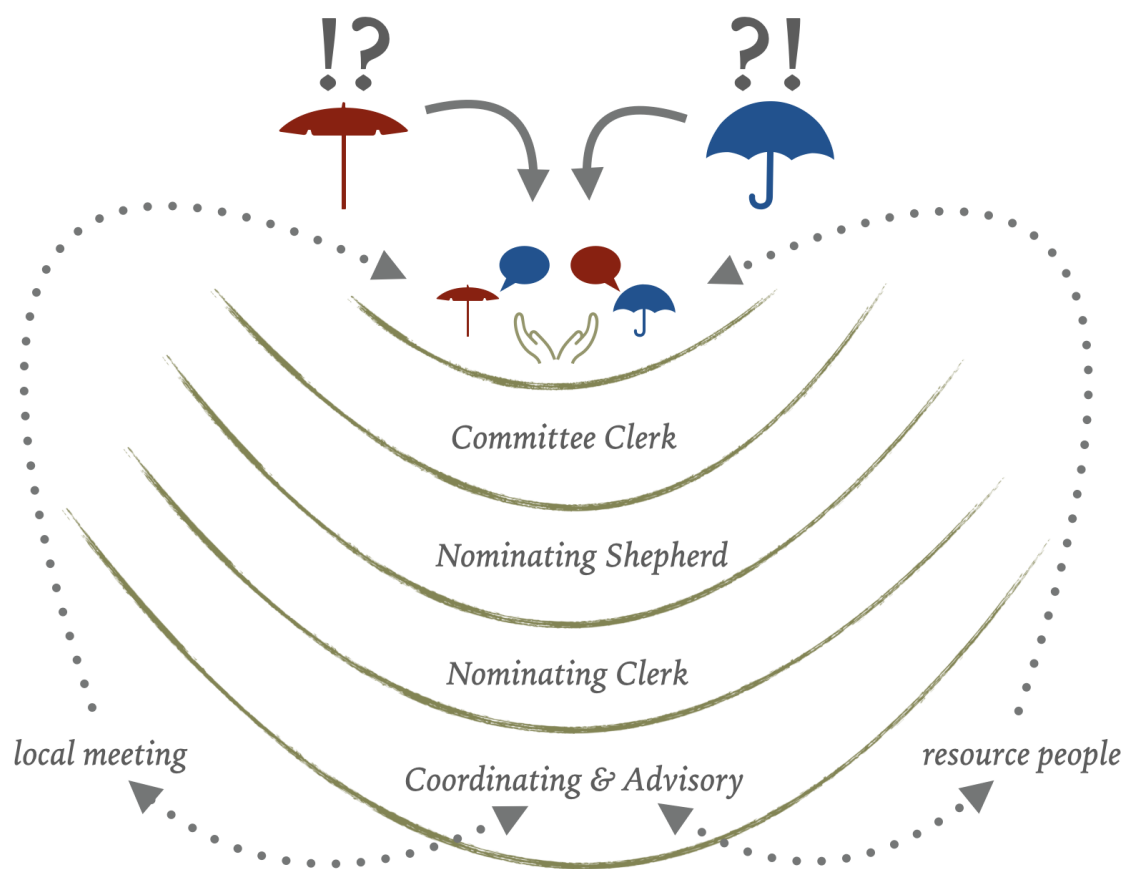
In the context of volunteer service on committees and other groups:

All Friends are encouraged to seek to follow Matthew 18's instructions on addressing conflicts in keeping with "gospel order", and to work together to acknowledge and address conflicts which may arise.

The clerks of committees, working groups, and resource groups have primary responsibility (beyond the parties themselves) for identifying and seeking to address conflicts which occur among members of their committees, ensuring opportunities for airing differences of perspective, acknowledging tensions, supporting opportunities for

Friends to feel heard, and, if necessary, meeting with Friends who may have more deeply felt concerns and considering steps to restore healthy interpersonal relationships in support of shared service and the charge of the group.

When conflicts or concerns relate to the behavior of the clerk of the committee, or when issues are not responsive to resolution or amelioration through the actions of the committee clerk, the clerk (or other members of the committee) may seek assistance and support from the Yearly Meeting Nominating Committee, either through their committee's appointed nominating shepherd, or by contacting the clerk of the Nominating Committee at nominating@neym.org. See graphical illustration of this process below.



Conflict involved in volunteer staff service with youth programs:

Concerns arising among Friends engaged in volunteer service in the context of youth programs (that is, those serving as volunteer or stipended youth staff) should be brought to the coordinator of the program in as timely a way as possible. If unresolved concerns involve the actions of the program's coordinator, they should be shared with the coordinator's direct supervisor (in the case of the youth retreat programs, this is the

Program Director, at nia@neym.org). Concerns about the conduct of staff may also always be shared with the Yearly Meeting Secretary at ymsec@neym.org.

Conflict relating to more global concerns or troubling behaviors arising in the life and service of the Yearly Meeting:

In addition to the roles of the committee clerk, Nominating shepherd, and the Clerk of Nominating Committee, Friends serving as Presiding Clerk, Clerk of the Permanent Board, Clerk of Ministry & Counsel, Clerk of Meeting Accompaniment, and Yearly Meeting Secretary have a particular and global role and responsibility in seeking to be aware of and respond to unhealthy dynamics of conflict arising in the work of the Yearly Meeting, and in the life of local meetings.

When concerns relate to the actions of one of the Friends serving in the roles above, they should be shared with one or more of the other Friends serving in these roles. These Friends will consult with other relevant parties, and determine a response as the Spirit leads them.

Situations involving abuse, harassment, discrimination, or improper use of power and privilege:

In cases involving—or perceived to involve—abuse, harassment, discrimination, or improper use of power, authority, or privilege, concerns should be shared in confidence with one or more of the Friends listed above, who will consult and initiate a process of discernment and engagement to respond to the concerns, consistent with their appointed roles and responsibilities.

These Friends may consult with or enlist the assistance of Friends with particular gifts, experience, or expertise as they seek to assess the dynamics at play and to respond as they discern may be needed, with care for all individuals involved, as well as the wellbeing of the groups involved and the wider body.

In all cases, a first priority in responding to possible abuse or harassment will be to establish boundaries to protect those experiencing abuse or harassment¹. Efforts to encourage resolution, restoring relationships, forgiveness, and mutual understanding are deeply important, but will not be fruitful without, and should never be prioritized over, first establishing the basic safety or wellbeing of those being targeted or experiencing harassment or abuse.

¹ For additional guidance on situations involving NEYM employees, see the policy on harassment in the NEYM Personnel Policy at neym.org.

Recommendations for Attention Going Forward

The document above seeks to present both a framing of an approach to conflict consistent with Quaker faith and current practice in the Yearly Meeting, and to make explicit specific pathways and responsibilities that exist currently. Below are some initial reflections from the Coordinating and Advisory Committee on where attention might helpfully be focused as we look ahead.

We recommend that the Yearly Meeting:

1. Reflect on ways in which the practices described above are functioning currently, and how they might be strengthened or changed to better serve these purposes;
2. Explore ways to more effectively and consistently communicate pathways for responding to conflict, recognizing that many Friends may not be aware (or may need of be reminded) of these practices;
3. Consider opportunities and capacities for ongoing education, training, and engagement with skills and methodologies for responding to conflict consistent with Friends faith and practice, both for Friends generally and for those charged with specific responsibilities for response to conflict in the life of the Yearly Meeting. This would potentially include committee and working/resource group clerks, staff, youth ministries volunteers, and Friends serving in other volunteer leadership roles;
4. Examine how resources or capacities developed might relate to our primary purpose of strengthening the life and ministry of local meetings, and how efforts focused on response to conflict arising beyond the scope of a local meeting might relate to and be informed by wisdom and existing practice in local meetings;
5. Integrate insights from the steps above into the ongoing work of the Yearly Meeting, including especially the work of the Nominating Committee to nurture and support the expressions of gifts and skills in service, and to support the functioning of the Yearly Meeting as a whole.

In support of this, the Coordinating & Advisory Committee recommends that C&A be charged by the Permanent Board, in consultation with Nominating Committee and consistent with our practice, to bring forward to the December 9, 2023 meeting of the Permanent Board a charge and nominations for a **working group on strengthening capacities for response to conflict** arising in the life and work of the Yearly Meeting, to make recommendations to Permanent Board for further discernment and action.

Discernment of nominations to serve as part of this working group would include Friends with relevant gifts, skills, and experience who have expressed their availability and interest, as well as other Friends whose names may rise in this process, to allow for broad consideration. Consistent with Sessions Minute 2023-703, this working group would also include the Presiding Clerk, Clerk of Ministry & Counsel, and Clerk of the Permanent Board.

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