

Proposal: Developing an Ongoing Capacity and Practice of Consultation and Reflection on Youth Ministries

Background:

For several years, our youth ministries staff and Youth Ministries Committee have lifted up the need for ongoing consultation regarding the spiritual condition of Quaker youth and families and the overall health of our youth ministries. At Sessions this August, this desire for more robust and sustained attention was heard again and Permanent Board affirmed that care for youth ministries is part of the work of the Board and wider body (minute PB 23-39). The Coordinating and Advisory Committee was tasked with proposing a next step in regard to consultation and care for youth ministries, with awareness that a new purpose and procedure aligned with past learning and intentions has just been approved for the Youth Ministries Committee.

The proposal below summarizes the challenge we are currently facing and a suggested approach to how ongoing consultation regarding youth ministry could become an ongoing capacity and commitment for the Yearly Meeting. This proposal comes from Coordinating and Advisory, in consultation with the youth ministries staff.

Youth Ministries Vision:

New England Yearly Meeting seeks to strengthen vibrant, multigenerational Quaker communities and the practice of the Quaker faith for people of all ages. We honor this intention through offering programs (such as weekend retreats, multigenerational gatherings, and summer camp) and by uplifting, connecting, and partnering with those serving locally.

As the world we live in changes rapidly, so do the day-to-day lives of youth and families. Still, in these times just as in any others, young people are seeking belonging, meaning, accompaniment, and enduring answers to life's hardest questions. In all its offerings, NEYM strives to listen deeply and respond thoughtfully and prayerfully to how we can best foster the spiritual development of youth amid current social, cultural, and economic conditions.

Challenge summary:

A healthy living system is an intelligent learner. It can adapt and survive even though its environment is moving towards increasing disorder. But it must be actively engaged and aware, never losing focus on its environment. Failing to pay attention and adapt is a prescription for death. ~ Margaret Wheatley

The current structures and programming of the Yearly Meeting's youth ministry were designed in an era where social conditions were much more stable than they currently are. For many years, the primary job for youth ministry staff was to offer similar programming from year to year for

an audience which naturally arose from Quaker families' participation in local meetings. Evolution of our retreat programs was gradual.

In recent years, conditions—in our wider society, in the lives of youth and families, and in our local meetings—have changed much more rapidly. Youth ministers have been caught in a bind of both *needing to adapt* to respond to current needs and *not being sufficiently empowered* to make significant changes, because the wider Yearly Meeting and key stakeholders had not yet developed a more shared understanding of the emerging context, with both its opportunities and challenges. Without wider and richer ongoing discernment, youth ministers are left making decisions, not from a primary focus on how Friends are led, but rather from a focus of what won't cause alarm. Working from a place of trying to please everybody, youth ministers aren't given consistent or focused indicators of success, and experience burnout. At the same time, Friends and meetings whose primary participation is not via our current youth programs often feel unheard, underserved by, and disconnected from NEYM's current offerings.

Proposal: That the Youth Ministries Committee (which is composed of NEYM's Youth Ministries staff and six volunteer members) undertake consistent, robust, creative, and widely consultative listening to inform youth ministry decisions and to provide more transparency, accountability, and support for our youth ministries.

Rather than seek to address these issues “once and for all,” we are imagining a cyclical process, regularly returning to essential questions to continually improve and build resilience in our youth ministries. Taking place every 1 to 3 years, this consultative cycle may take multiple forms of engagement (written reports, online or in-person gatherings, calls to local meetings and individual youth ministers, focus groups, etc.), but should be grounded in the questions below and should culminate in a periodic report shared with the wider Yearly Meeting for comment and ongoing conversation. Insights from these reports would then inform funding priorities, staffing responsibilities, and other important discernment of New England Friends.

Reflection questions for youth ministers, interested youth, and parents to respond to at least annually:

- What recent stories related to youth ministry should the wider Yearly Meeting hear?
- Based on your recent experiences, what challenges and possibilities do you see related to the following:
 - Current and emerging models of youth ministry
 - The spiritual condition of youth, families, and youth ministers
 - Quaker faith formation
 - Outreach to youth and families
- What new experiments seem ripe to try in the above areas? What current work do you sense should be deprioritized or set aside?

- What do you see as current indicators of the health of the path we are on in regards to youth ministry?
- What resources, relationships, and connections seem most vital to this ministry at this time?
- Is there any support needed to sustain this ministry that is not currently being provided?

Today, we ask that the Permanent Board approve that the Youth Ministries Committee be tasked with leading ongoing, cyclical consultation regarding youth ministry, consistent with the description above. While the particular forms of consultation may change from year to year, the Youth Ministries Committee shall report to the Yearly Meeting as part of each consultation cycle.

Please send any questions regarding this proposal to Program Director Nia Thomas (nia@neym.org).