

Draft Plan: Sessions Visioning 2025+

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Background

Recent years have brought many changes, both internal and external, to the context and circumstances surrounding NEYM Annual Sessions. These include increasing costs, diminished capacity to pay on the part of many Friends and families, reduced and shifting patterns of attendance, increased demand for supportive services and capacities, reductions in volunteer availability, and growing awareness of the need to focus and prioritize limited attention and resources.

In light of all of these changes, the Yearly Meeting's model of programming, logistics, services, and funding for the event of Annual Sessions is in need of review and reimagining. With recent financial deficit for Sessions (2022), potential for a deficit in 2024, as well as a relatively low level of operating reserves at the time of writing, there is a need to carry out this review and reimagining creatively, dynamically, consultatively, and in a timely way.

Objectives

To engage many Friends across New England in meaningful consultation and discernment regarding future offerings of NEYM's Annual Sessions¹.

This consultation and discernment should set the stage for the Yearly Meeting to make decisions which:

1. Clarify the essential purpose(s) of Sessions in a way that allows for acknowledging trade-offs in planning
2. Clarify which components of Sessions could (and do) happen at other times or in other ways

¹ Although the focus is on Sessions specifically, questions about Sessions are entwined with considerations about the Yearly Meeting as a whole.

3. Reduce the downside financial risks to the Yearly Meeting
4. Reduce the level of services and overhead that are the responsibility of the YM as an organization. Reduce overload for those with key responsibilities for putting on Sessions
5. Reduce reliance on recruitment of volunteers to cover essential roles
6. Rebalance the investment of limited resources of time, energy, and money, allowing reinvestment in other aspects of NEYM's core purpose of nurturing the thriving of Friends Meetings throughout the year

We seek to maximize active listening and engagement, bringing together varied perspectives on Annual Sessions' purpose and its relationship to the wider Yearly Meeting. We believe the process outlined below will help to “pave the way” for healthy, necessary, and Spirit-led changes; that participating Friends will grow in their ability to be participants in on-going discernment and experimentation regarding Sessions, listening together for how God is calling our Yearly Meeting at this time. We also have endeavored to write a consultation plan that is usable, adaptable, and realistic.

Measures of Success

- A felt sense of Spirit in the rooms where conversations are taking place; ability of Friends to let go of personal opinions to listen to God's guidance for the Way Forward
- Although unlikely to end up with Friends all agreeing on every aspect of Sessions, we are hoping that we will **grow towards unity** so that incremental decisions can be made. Key metaphor: We're not trying to create “MapQuest” step-by-step directions to a specific location, we're trying to increase the number of Friends who are looking at the same map and navigating towards the same general direction
- This process supports (or at least doesn't get in the way of) the thriving of local meetings

Key Questions for Consultation and Discernment

Phase I of this visioning process lifts up key questions essential to the visioning process:

1. What is the purpose of Sessions?
2. Who do we hope will attend Sessions? Why?
3. What infrastructure and resources do we need to achieve our purpose?
4. How do we prepare for and hold corporate discernment during Sessions?

5. Are there things we currently include in Sessions which could happen at another time instead?

Regarding these questions, our working group notes that while Friends differ somewhat in their personal passions and priorities for their time at Sessions, there is much common ground to be found in the list of reasons why Friends attend Sessions in general. Time does not need to be spent brainstorming the reasons why Friends attend but rather is best spent exploring how these purposes can be nurtured by Friends and by the Yearly Meeting inside of and beyond Sessions in a way that adapts to capacity limitations.

We also note that among the purposes for Sessions, corporate discernment is the most enduring and, in many ways, the most challenging due to the level of spiritual and practical preparation that large group discernment on complex issues involves.

While it is necessary to make decisions regarding the model or shape of Sessions going forward, there is a need for particular reflection on how our practice of corporate discernment can deepen and enrich the lives of Friends across New England.

Design Principles and Underlying Assumptions

- We have intentionally created a detailed but not complete plan. While it's important for the overall design to be thought through in advance, we intentionally have left room for important details to be discerned along the way as more Friends engage in this process.
- Sessions cannot be all things to all people. The current strain experienced by those in leadership roles at Sessions is unsustainable and moving out of the straining place we are in now will require compassionate listening and discernment.
- Sessions is, and will continue to be, of more personal importance to some Friends than others. That being said, to assess the impact of Sessions, we must look beyond Friends who attend. The value of Sessions is not limited to Friends who participate directly. Because of this, as we explore potential changes to Sessions, we must explore the possible impact both on Friends who attend regularly as well as Friends who do not regularly attend but who are impacted in indirect ways such as through their local meeting.
- We will not be able to move towards unity by staying within the silos of those who already share similar perspectives and experiences. This will be a process of listening for all of us. There are particular insights that will be gained from gathering Friends sharing a common concern; however, care should be taken to not create closed silos or to isolate these Friends from the wider discernment.

- Although there will be some need to discuss the short-term goals we ascribe to Sessions (healthy attendance, financial stability, reduced overload for Sessions planners), we need to point Friends' attention toward the longer-term outcomes (impact on local meetings and the Quaker faith in New England overall). The goal is not to use market research to "fix" the current model to please more potential attenders, but rather to step into broader imagining and discernment about how Annual Sessions relates to the wider work of the Yearly Meeting now.
- We prioritize critical connections over critical mass (Margaret Wheatley).
Meaning: We intentionally value the reflections that arise from groups of Friends engaging in dialogue and worshipful reflection together over simply gathering as many individual responses as possible.
 - If surveys are used, they should be used to gather background information rather than build towards unity. Collective discernment will get us further than a collection of individual opinions.
- Although some conversation will need to happen on Zoom, we encourage groups of Friends to physically gather when possible
- There are two things needed to bring Friends to the table for meaningful consultation and discernment: accessible background information and skilled facilitation that makes space for us all to share and listen well. Facilitators need to be able to bring the group in so they are ready to listen to Spirit. Depending on the group, this preparation will look different (a song, a shared meal, an icebreaker).
- We will need to ask for and accept God's guidance throughout this process.

Methods and timeline

- **Fall 2024-PREPARATION:**
 - Feasibility study and alternative model development
 - The Events Coordinator will take a lead role in interviews with Friends with awareness of alternative models used by other faith communities (including other Yearly Meetings) in order to capture descriptions of other likely approaches in simple terms. Recent Sessions planners will provide insights into feasibility of such models, given current Yearly Meeting capacities in terms of pros, cons, and unknowns. This information will be made available to Friends participating in the consultation and discernment process so they can benefit from the insights of what is already known about potential alternatives.

- Note: Friends participating in the consultation and discernment will **not** be limited to the alternative models already developed. The goal is not to limit conversation but rather focus it and also to share known information about limitations or challenges of potential models. We want to avoid a scenario where Friends spend lots of energy brainstorming and dreaming about something that would be very impractical in the short-term.
- Preparation of informational materials
 - The Program Director will take a lead role in consulting others to prepare background information for Friends engaging in this consultation and discernment. This will include:
 - Clearly stated reasons for why we are embarking on this process
 - Clear and concise information about the current model of Sessions; what makes our current model unique in the wider Quaker world, how it has evolved over the years, as well as challenges and benefits related to our current model and alternative models currently in use
 - Basic information about NEYM's current year-round offerings
- Facilitator, notetaker, and conversation partner recruitment and preparation:
 - Listening Group facilitators may be local meeting clerks or other Friends who can guide groups in trust-building, Spirit-led conversation. Notetakers should be able to listen carefully and summarize accurately, asking for clarification when needed. Conversation partners should be Friends who can engage with kindness and curiosity, encouraging constructive conversation. For all these roles, Friends will be invited to volunteer as well as nominate others. See Appendices for additional information about Listening Groups.
- Broad communication will be shared inviting Friends and meetings into the process. Responses sought regarding participation plans.
 - Ask meetings to tell us if they aren't interested or don't have capacity so that alternative Listening Groups can be offered to interested Friends in other ways (such as opportunities within Quarters)

- Development and distribution of Listening Group packets. Guidance and orientation offered to facilitators, notetakers, and conversation partners.
- **Winter 2024-2025-THRESHING:**
 - Listening Groups engage in dialogue and discernment
 - Listening Group notetakers share back participation notes
- **Spring 2025-DISTILLATION INTO DISCERNMENT:**
 - The facilitator or another designated individual from each Listening Group will be invited to participate in a **Visioning Day** to draw out and distill themes heard across groups. The purpose of this gathering is to move from the sharing/threshing/consultation phase into listening for our collective Way Forward, going beyond individual preferences using the notes from all Listening Groups as a starting point.
 - For facilitators or other designated individuals from Listening Groups who cannot participate in the Visioning Day, there will be a more flexible, lower-commitment way to review notes from the Listening Groups and share reflections on key themes emerging.
 - After this Visioning Day, a preliminary report will be shared back with Listening Group participants for comment before being shared for any formal decision-making purposes.
 - A revised version of the report will be shared with the Permanent Board in May 2025
 - The final report will be brought to Sessions in August 2025

Roles and Reporting

Once the above plan is affirmed, the Program Director (Nia Thomas) will serve as Project Manager, ensuring the plan is implemented and that related updates and reports are shared appropriately.

Hopefully, a large number of Friends will say “yes” to serving as facilitators, notetakers, and conversation partners.

As questions arise, the Project Manager will contact relevant advisors such as members of the Sessions Vision Planning Working Group, Listening Group facilitators, and the appropriate members of staff, current and recent Sessions planners, and Coordinating and Advisory.

The Events Coordinator will take a lead role in the feasibility study.

Periodic updates will be provided to Permanent Board and posted on the website.

Questions for Friends reading this plan:

This plan is a living document, informed by on-going conversation. In particular, we are looking for feedback about the following:

1. What excites you about this plan?
2. As we look towards revising or refining this plan ahead of Sessions, what questions or concerns do you have and what is your suggestion for how those concerns might be addressed? What is missing or confusing?
3. What role are you led to play?
 - a. Roles we know are needed: Listening Group Facilitators, Listening Group notetakers, outreach helpers (connecting Friends who are less involved in NEYM with Listening Groups), conversation partners to visit with peer or concern-based groups, researchers for feasibility study, elders

Appendix A: Initial brainstorm of content for Listening Group Packets [in development]

Background information provided to all Listening Group participants shall include:

1. Factsheet about the current Sessions model including Friends served, resources required, and history.
2. Overview of current Yearly Meeting offerings for youth and adults and their intended purposes.
3. Sketch of possible alternative models including likely pros, cons, and unknowns.

Reminders for Listening Groups and Listening Group Facilitators

1. While it is necessary to make decisions regarding the model or shape of Sessions going forward, there is a need for particular reflection on how our practice of corporate discernment can deepen and enrich the lives of Friends across New England.

2. Friends should speak from their own experience. If it feels necessary to speak beyond one's own experience, the speaker should clarify that what they are sharing is a perception and what, specifically that perception is based upon. This discipline makes space for us to test assumptions, acknowledge unknowns, and open our hearts and minds beyond our initial impressions. The facilitator will help the group maintain this necessary discipline.
3. Individuals speak from their own experience and do not represent all others in a demographic they may be a part of.
4. Be mindful of the tendency to oversimplify stories, to erase the multiplicity of factors that may have contributed to a given outcome, and to ascribe cause and effect based on limited evidence. Make space for curiosity and complexity, acknowledge unknowns, step back from generalizations that go beyond what we have individually experienced.
5. EXPLANATION OF PROCESS: The facilitator or another designated individual from each Listening Group will be invited to participate in an early spring Visioning Day to draw out themes heard across groups. After this Visioning Day, a preliminary report will be shared back with Listening Group participants for comment before being shared for any formal decision-making purposes.
6. [insert information about other Listening Groups and perspectives included so that Friends are reassured they don't need to speak for others or from hypothetical concerns but rather from their own experience]

Guidance for Listening Group Notetakers

1. Ensure that each individual in the Listening Group has filled out a **participation log**. If they need support with this online form, assist them in filling it out. This log captures basic demographic information. The goal is to have a sense of what perspectives have been included in the listening process and where more focused invitations to participation may be particularly helpful. Information captured:
 - a. Name
 - b. Meeting/worship group (if any);
 - c. Roles in local meeting, Yearly Meeting, and Sessions (if any);
 - d. Age group: youth, younger adult, middle adult, older adult; parent of minors (yes/no)
 - e. Sessions participation history: has never attended, has not attended in 5+ years, attends sometimes; regularly attends

Top Reasons Why Friends Currently Participate in Sessions:

- Corporate Discernment (the founding reason, the core purpose named in Faith & Practice)
- Reflecting back on ourselves as Quakers; “Who are we as Quakers?”
- Quaker witness in the wider world
- Fellowship/relationship building
- Faith formation/ Spiritual growth (youth, adults, families)
- Worship
- To be with the ministers and elders among us and experience their gifts
- Learning about what Quakers are doing in other meetings, other places
- Gathering with Quaker peers you might not have in your local meeting (Friends who share your passion or your condition or your developmental stage)
- A sense of duty
- A desire to serve, give back, and/or share their gifts

What are the ways New England Friends and NEYM (the organization) could tend to the above things in a way that would be life-giving and realistic in terms of resources and accessibility?

Appendix B: Stakeholders

Who are the stakeholders?

There are four general categories of New England Friends in relation to Sessions:

<p>Committed Attenders Attend all or most of the time; their default is to attend Sessions unless something major comes up (serious illness, family wedding, etc)</p>	<p>Provisional Attenders: Consider attending Sessions and even sometimes attend, sometimes don't depending on various factors some of which may be barriers.</p>
<p>Staff and Sessions Leadership: Must attend by nature of their service commitments; play key roles in putting on Sessions</p>	<p>Disinterested Friends: Quakers active in their meeting but not interested in Sessions. Even if we changed a number of factors about Sessions, the general concept is not particularly compelling.</p>

- The people in the yellow boxes have a stake in the future of the Sessions event itself.
- The active Friends in all boxes have a stake in how Sessions impacts local meetings.
- The people in the darker yellow box may have particular insight into the most salient issues with the current Sessions model.

Appendix C: Brainstorm of potential Listening Groups focused on a shared concern or experience

In addition to Listening Groups gathering Friends locally across perspectives and experiences, there will be Listening Groups focused on particular shared experiences or common concerns. These Listening Groups will not be traditional homogeneous “focus groups” (which can create silos) but rather will be composed of Friends drawn to the particular focus as well as Friends invited to serve as conversation partners bringing compassionate curiosity, dialogue, and reflecting back what is heard beneath the words.

The list below is a brainstorm of potential Listening Groups. As facilitators and conversation partners are identified and brought into this work, the precise groupings will be determined.

Possible Groups:

1. Life-stage based cohorts composed of Friends in life-stages which are often under-represented in local meetings such as elementary-age youth, middle-school age youth, high-school age youth, emerging adults (ages 18-25), parents of minors. For all groups it will be important to include a mix of those who have and have not attended Sessions.
2. Concern based groups such as Friends carrying a concern for the quality of corporate discernment and worship in NEYM, Friends carrying a concern for the vitality of local meetings, Friends carrying a concern for Quaker witness in the wider world, Friends carrying a concern for Quaker family life and youth faith formation, Friends carrying a concern for the long-term financial health of NEYM
3. Friends for whom participating in Sessions is currently a significant challenge but would like to attend.