

# Sessions Visioning Guide for Listening Groups

New England Yearly Meeting

2025



# Introduction

Thank you for being here, Friend.

As Quakers from across New England gathered for our Annual Sessions last August, Friends approved embarking on a year-long consultation and discernment process to re-vision our Annual Sessions, the largest and longest gathering for Friends in our region. Through informed dialogue, reflection, and worship we hope to re-align, revitalize, and “right size” Sessions to reflect current needs and resources. This isn’t just an opportunity to improve an event. This is a conversation about how our Yearly Meeting’s practice of corporate discernment, our relationships with other Quakers, and our use of limited resources can most meaningfully contribute to the spiritual thriving of Friends across New England. Whether you’ve come to Annual Sessions for as long as you can remember or whether you’re just hearing about it now, we’d love to hear your perspective.

The purpose of this packet is to set the table for meaningful conversation and discernment. Because we want you at the table with us, this packet contains a lot of information aimed at providing the context needed for all Friends to understand the challenges and possibilities before us now. We’ve done our best to include enough detail but not too much.

We’ve invited local meetings, quarterly meetings, and other groups (such as youth programs) to hold a Listening Session at some point this winter (before April 1). **These Listening Sessions are facilitated conversations that we expect will take most groups about two hours.**

If you are not able to participate in a Listening Session via your local meeting and would like to find another opportunity to participate, please contact [nia@neym.org](mailto:nia@neym.org).

**If you are participating in a Listening Session, please read this packet beforehand, as it will add to the focus and richness of the dialogue.** There is no need to commit the facts to memory or hold onto every detail. This background material includes some alternatives to our current model of Sessions. Please know we include these alternatives not to limit our options but to clarify known realities, to invite all Friends into informed, creative brainstorming.

After the Listening Sessions take place, each group will send in notes from their Listening Session and, in addition, each group is invited to send up to two Friends to Visioning Day, to be held on April 12th at Wellesley (MA) Meeting, where the reflections from all groups will be distilled. From there, a report will be developed, shared with participants, collectively refined throughout the spring and early summer, and then brought to Friends at Sessions this August 2025.

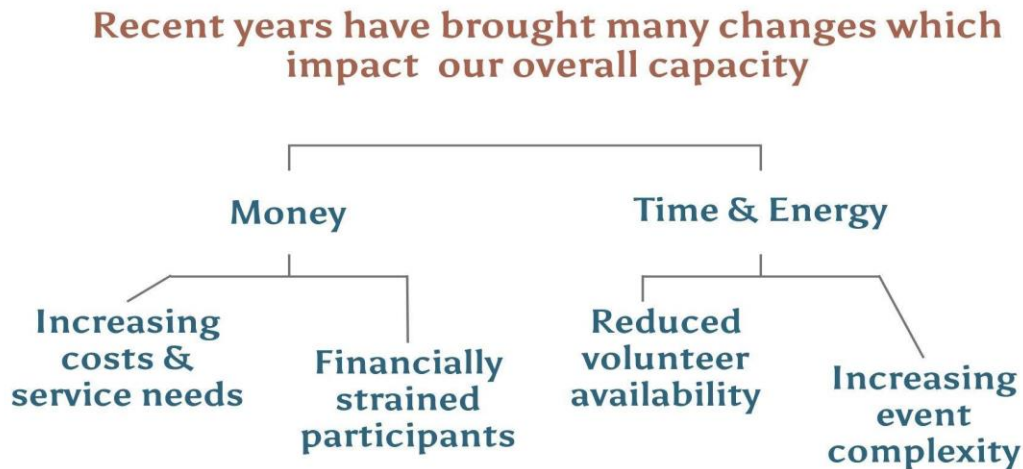
More information about the development of this process is available at [neym.org/sessions-visioning](https://neym.org/sessions-visioning). If any additional questions arise related to this process, please contact Program Director Nia Thomas at [nia@neym.org](mailto:nia@neym.org). Onward.

# Table of Contents

Why Re-Envision Annual Sessions?.....	1
History: the evolution of Yearly Meeting Sessions.....	2
The early years: Corporate discernment via representatives.....	2
Families and Informal Participation.....	2
The Gurneyite—Wilburite separation.....	2
Recent decades: the residential conference model.....	3
The Current Model of Sessions: Context and Insights.....	4
Impact of the Pandemic on Sessions.....	5
What do other Yearly Meetings do?.....	7
Yearly Meeting Business Between Sessions.....	7
By the numbers: Sessions Fact Sheet.....	9
Financial Factors Regarding Sessions.....	10
What are the biggest financial challenges of the current model?.....	11
Possible Sessions Scenarios.....	13
Options:.....	13
How would changes to Sessions affect Friends Camp?.....	20
About Listening Sessions.....	21
Reminders for all Listening Session participants.....	21
Guidance for facilitators.....	21
Guidance for Listening Group Notetakers.....	22
Listening Group Prompts.....	24
Participation in Visioning Day.....	26
With Gratitude.....	27

# Why Re-Envision Annual Sessions?

In recent years, internal and external changes have affected the context of New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) Annual Sessions—rising costs, changes in attendance patterns, reduced volunteer availability, and growing demands on our limited resources. These shifts have prompted us to rethink how we plan, fund, and offer Annual Sessions.



As we face financial deficits from recent Sessions and minimal reserves, it's clear that the current model for Sessions needs reimagining. We're called to approach this creatively, collaboratively, and with care, inviting input from Friends across New England.

Through meaningful consultation and discernment, we aim to:

- Clarify the core purpose of Annual Sessions, acknowledging necessary trade-offs
- Explore how corporate discernment, an essential and enduring purpose of Sessions, can nourish Friends throughout New England in our present condition
- Identify elements of Sessions that could happen at other times or in different ways
- Reduce financial risks and organizational overhead
- Lighten the load for key contributors and decrease the strain of recruiting for hard-to-fill volunteer roles
- Realign our resources—time, energy, and money—toward nurturing local meetings year-round

Let us navigate this journey with open hearts and trust that Way Forward will be revealed as we faithfully listen.

# History: the evolution of Yearly Meeting Sessions

## The early years: Corporate discernment via representatives

In the first 200 years or so of New England Yearly Meeting—spanning from the mid-1600s to the mid-1800s—Sessions was centered around **corporate discernment** (Meeting for Worship with attention to business). Representatives, appointed by their local meetings, were seasoned Friends who could speak to the condition of their meeting, share news, and return with updates from Sessions. These representatives were not advocates for constituencies in the secular sense of the word “representatives,” but rather spiritual emissaries, sometimes selected with the involvement of quarterly meetings.

Sessions attendance during this period was relatively small, especially in relation to the larger size of the Quaker population in New England. The focus was on matters related to church discipline, such as reports on the state of local meetings, conflict resolution, and responding to concerns such as Quakers being jailed for pacifism or the need for relief efforts after natural disasters. The Meeting for Worship at Sessions also played a vital role, with vocal ministry offering guidance and spiritual strength to local meetings throughout the year.

Interestingly, the queries used today in New England Yearly Meeting emerged from worship held at these early Sessions. Friends attended with the expectation of receiving divine guidance for themselves and their communities.

## Families and Informal Participation

Hearing about this early model you may ask: Were families and children present at Sessions? Yes. While there wasn't the formal structure we see today—like renting college campuses or organizing youth programs—families often accompanied representatives and stayed with local Quakers. This informal hospitality facilitated relationship-building and intervisitation around the edges of Sessions.

## The Gurneyite—Wilburite separation

During the mid-1800s, the Yearly Meeting split into Gurneyite and Wilburite branches. Over time, the Gurneyite yearly meeting began to look quite different from earlier Sessions, while the Wilburite Sessions remained more similar to the early years' model. For the larger Gurneyite yearly meeting, attendance was still relatively small (around 100 to 200 people), but there was a greater emphasis on formal **religious education**. This period marked the beginnings of the Junior Yearly Meeting, a precursor to modern youth programming. This was also a time when more organized activities became part of Sessions. Fun example: Bible quizzing competitions, which began at the local meeting

level, progressed to the quarterly meeting, and culminated in a championship at the yearly meeting!

Additionally, this period saw the creation (in the Gurneyite yearly meeting) of what would become the Permanent Board, an evolution of the body originally (and also at this time in the Wilburite YM) called the Meeting for Sufferings. This separated year-round organizational work, such as church growth/outreach, financial, legal, and property-related tasks, and care for programmatic ministries, from the broader spiritual concerns related to the daily life of Friends and Friends meetings which were explored at Sessions.

### **Recent decades: the residential conference model**

Beginning in the 1970s and intensifying in the 1980s, Sessions underwent a significant transformation. Modeled after the Friends General Conference (FGC), which traditionally took place every three years, Sessions began to include workshops, structured youth programs, and a broader range of activities<sup>1</sup>. Outreach for Sessions geared the event much more explicitly towards individuals and families looking to gather with other Quakers. Attendance increased dramatically<sup>2</sup>, and Sessions became more resource-intensive<sup>3</sup>, requiring year-round planning by both volunteers and paid staff.

New England Yearly Meeting Sessions eventually became among the largest annual Quaker gatherings in North America, surpassed only by the Friends General Conference “Gathering,” a North-America-wide event. This multi-day residential conference model also influenced other yearly meetings, such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York, which adopted similar approaches during this period.

---

<sup>1</sup> The contra dance (previously square dance) began in 1976; worship-sharing groups began in 1975.

<sup>2</sup> In 1965, Sessions attendance was 407 and in 1970 it was 344. Then in 1980 it was 568 (at University of Southern Maine). Sessions attendance peaked at 780 in 1990 (at Hampshire College) and 2005 (at Bryant University). In the 2010s attendance fluctuated between 600–715.

<sup>3</sup> In 1960, \$5,146.47 was paid to Lasell College for rooms and meals (that’s \$54,820.51 in 2024 dollars). Compare that to 2024, when \$127,106.70 was paid to Castleton for rooms and meals for a comparable number of attendees. While this does not reflect the full cost of Sessions, it does offer a basis for comparison in this dimension of costs.

# The Current Model of Sessions: Context and Insights

The previous *Brief History* section offers a historical framework for Sessions as a whole. The goal of this section is to describe the more modern shape of Sessions and how our Yearly Meeting gathering differs or is similar to others.

As the name implies, the Yearly Meeting holds a large once-a-year gathering for our corporate discernment. Each year, hundreds of Quakers of all ages from across New England and beyond join together for worship, fellowship, and seeking how God will guide us in meeting for business.

Sessions attracts Friends of all ages and we run programming for youth of all ages. Our attendees run from a few months of age to over 80 years.

Sessions can be so many things for Friends:

- An opportunity for community-building beyond our local meetings
- A time to conduct the business of the Yearly Meeting
- A spiritually nourishing family vacation
- A chance for youth to connect with Quaker peers
- A pause for restorative worship
- A sharing of joys and sorrows in our lives together as Friends

## **What makes NEYM's Sessions different from other Yearly Meeting Sessions?**

- It's larger (most years, NEYM has the largest Yearly Meeting attendance in North America).
- It's longer (for a number of Yearly Meetings, Sessions are just 2 or 3 days).
- It's more elaborate (in terms of communications and thoroughness of the advance documents for business, sophisticated hybrid setup customized to our needs, programmatic offerings including youth programs, services including Spanish language interpretation, supports, and resources offered).
- We have a commitment to pay-as-led, meaning no Friends are turned away due to lack of funds, with no need to apply for financial support.
- Our Permanent Board carries the responsibility for the on-going business of the Yearly Meeting, ensuring responsiveness and attention to matters that may arise throughout the year. This helps season business and carry forward ongoing work throughout the year.
- Our youth programs are integrated with year-round retreat programs and under the care of year-round staff.
- While there are dedicated youth ministers throughout the Quaker world, many visitors remark how NEYM's youth programs are well attended and well



organized. Our Yearly Meeting is deeply blessed to have had so many Friends who have served our youth ministries year after year, developing a depth of relationship with families and a depth of experience with organizing our youth programs.

## **Impact of the Pandemic on Sessions**

As we all know, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly altered our world and how we engage in communal activities. Beyond the catastrophic loss of life, the pandemic has taken a deep emotional and spiritual toll, as individuals have faced prolonged isolation, grief from the loss of loved ones, and uncertainty about the future. Many Friends have struggled with feelings of loneliness, fear, and anxiety, challenging their sense of connection and purpose. In responding to these conditions, Friends meetings and organizations have experienced turbulence and exhaustion. Similarly, the pandemic has exacerbated challenges in holding our annual Sessions.

Over the past three years we have transitioned, like so many groups, from an on-campus only event to a hybrid event. The majority of our attendees are still on campus. In 2020 and 2021 the Annual Sessions were held online only, through Zoom. In 2022, we returned to campus with several restrictions, including vaccine requirements, masking, and testing. In the last two years, we have loosened the Covid restrictions in response to guidance from our host site and state public health officials, but have still needed a health coordinator to help Sessions planners navigate health-related decisions in advance of and during the event.

The expansion of Sessions into a hybrid event has both opened up opportunities for participation for Friends unable to attend on campus and made offering Sessions significantly more complex. Supporting the technological components of Sessions requires recruiting and training an additional coordinator and a skilled team of volunteers. The complexity of the setup—including multiple cameras, video feeds, and Spanish interpretation—demands specific expertise and equipment, which can be challenging to integrate with the site. Large gatherings also require careful coordination between speakers, the tech team, and the events coordinator. To fully support remote participants, each event follows a detailed "run of show." Additionally, while Zoom allows Friends to join from campus and provides valuable accessibility, it can result in a sparsely attended in-person business meeting and a more dispersed presence on site.

The pandemic has also accelerated shifts impacting youth programming at Sessions. Current economic conditions mean fewer working-age adults have sufficient time off to volunteer to staff our youth programs. While a number of volunteers, especially young adults, opted to receive funds to offset loss of income for volunteering at Sessions, taking time away from work is still not an option for many. For other volunteers, the effects of aging, the physical challenge of increasingly hot and humid summers, and the health

concerns associated with Covid have resulted in some long-time volunteers opting to participate in Sessions off site or in less physically demanding ways. Recruiting the volunteers needed to safely staff our youth programs has become increasingly difficult, resource-intensive, stressful, and worryingly uncertain.

For a number of years Annual Sessions typically ran from the first Saturday in August to the following Thursday, with some limited staff on site a few days before for setup. In recent years, Friends were encouraged to arrive on Friday evening and programming only ran to midday Wednesday, due to changes in availability at our site. This has compressed the Sessions schedule somewhat.

With the current model, there are questions that Sessions planners continue to wrestle with:

- In general, Sessions participants rate Sessions very highly on participant evaluations. The most frequent feedback can be summarized into two simultaneously held but conflicting statements: (1) That Friends leave Sessions yearning for more of whatever aspect of Sessions they found most meaningful and (2) that the length and density of Sessions makes it exhausting and challenging to fit in around other life demands.
- Despite many welcoming efforts, it is not infrequent for newcomers to report having a more challenging time at Sessions than returning participants. Are there things about the current shape of our Sessions that make being a newcomer particularly hard?
- We are fortunate to have a very high response rate in terms of participant evaluations, but the feedback is skewed because we have many more respondents over the age of 65 than working-age respondents. How can we take care to not let this disproportionate feedback distort our thinking about participant needs and preferences?
- Our current Sessions run Saturday to Wednesday, which can be very challenging for families who may need caregiving on Thursday and Friday if it is not possible for parents to take the entire week off of work. Most summer programs run by the week, so is our current schedule for Sessions causing a gap in childcare for families?
- While many Friends have deep enthusiasm for the special possibilities that come with hybrid Sessions, expectations differ in terms of the degree of interaction between online and on-site participants. How do we give adequate attention to the hybrid experience amid competing commitments?
- For many Friends, Sessions seems to be the best opportunity for their work to be seen by other Friends. This creates many demands on a limited stretch of time, tough decisions, and disappointment. Are there other ways to celebrate, recognize, honor, and support the contributions and leadings of Friends in New

England? Are there ways to lessen the burden on the Sessions agenda while also reaching more Friends across New England?

## **What do other Yearly Meetings do?**

We are not alone in our struggles. Other yearly meetings and Quaker groups have faced the same challenges we have in holding residential, conference-style events, including significant financial deficits, lack of suitable sites for their populations, different perspectives about the use of hybrid technology, and difficulty recruiting volunteers needed, especially for youth programs. In recent years, other groups have taken different approaches in moving away from that model. Some examples:


- Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, with 2-3 times the staffing, is also currently considering changes to their approach to Sessions. Currently, PYM's Annual Sessions consist of two days that are entirely online, followed by a weekend-long hybrid gathering. In addition, they have day-long hybrid "continuing Sessions," one in the spring and one in the fall (with assorted regional locations).
- Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends has a four-day hybrid Annual Sessions (Sunday to Wednesday), along with a midyear gathering online in February.
- New York Yearly Meeting has recently made shifts to the shape of their Sessions due to similar constraints in capacity, costs, and availability of venues. Most recently, they offered a summer hybrid Sessions. While their discernment is ongoing, they have needed to relocate from a resort to a Friends school and now have only been able to offer limited housing on campus.
- Baltimore Yearly Meeting has Annual Sessions as well as Interim Meetings throughout the year. Like us, they are currently facing significant financial challenges related to their models of programming.
- Friends General Conference, with 3-4 times the staffing, now offers an in-person gathering every two years instead of every year, with a wintertime online conference in the alternate years. However, the most recent in-person conference resulted in lower than expected attendance and a \$178,000 deficit.

## **Yearly Meeting Business Between Sessions**

New England Yearly Meeting engages in continued corporate discernment on behalf of the Yearly Meeting outside of Annual Sessions via five seasonal Permanent Board meetings. While members of the Permanent Board are nominated to reflect broad geographic diversity across the NEYM region, these meetings are often hybrid and generally open to the participation of all Friends and take up ongoing business between Annual Sessions, with particular attention to organizational business. You may be wondering what the difference is between the yearly meetings that offer Annual Sessions with mid-year Sessions and our own model for corporate discernment which is Annual Sessions each summer and Permanent Board Meetings throughout the year.

For several of the other yearly meetings and associations currently offering mid-year Sessions, dividing opportunities for decision-making between seasonal gatherings without consistency of attendance between meetings has caused confusion and even dysfunction with items of business that aren't resolved in one gathering. This has led some yearly meetings to consider moving to a model more similar to the one used by New England Yearly Meeting, with a smaller nominated body attending to organizational business between annual Sessions.

# By the numbers: Sessions Fact Sheet

<p><b>Who is served by Sessions</b> Approximate total number of NE Friends 5,000<sup>4</sup></p>  <p>More than 9 in 10 Friends in New England don't participate in Sessions in a given year</p>	<p><b>Trends in Sessions Participation Totals</b> Total participants 1995: 723 Total participants 2004: 741 Total participants 2014: 636 Total participants 2019: 532 Total participants 2024: 452 (358 on campus, 94 on zoom)</p> <p>While the size of participation has declined, for the last 20 years, the percentage of first-time attenders has hovered around 10%</p>
<p><b>New England Friends by State<sup>5</sup></b> Massachusetts 47% Maine 17% Vermont 11% Connecticut 10% New Hampshire 9% Rhode Island 6%</p>	<p><b>Participation change by age</b> Steepest drop off in participation is 43–65 yr olds (there were 264 Friends in this age group on campus in 2014; in 2024 that number was 84, with an additional 18 participating via Zoom).</p>
<p><b>Meetings involved</b> Although participation rates have declined over the last decade, the approximate number of meetings participating in Sessions has stayed stable.</p> <p>At Sessions, there are Friends from about 85% of Friends Meetings in NEYM.</p>	<p><b>Volunteers Needed</b> In 2024, there were 64 fee-waived “full time” volunteer roles, such as coordinators for various aspects of Sessions and youth program staff. There are also many other roles with significant time requirements for Sessions, such as members of the clerks table. In addition to these roles with high time commitments, there are dozens of smaller roles that require advance recruiting. For some roles, ten Friends need to be asked to get one to say “yes.”</p>
<p><b>Sessions Cost</b> \$830 is the projected “traditional fee”<sup>6</sup> for an adult participating in Sessions 2025 full time</p>	<p><b>Zoom participation by age</b> Last year, about 1 in 5 Sessions participants participated off-campus via Zoom. Only 5% of Zoom participants were ages 41 or younger; 50% were over 66 years old.</p>

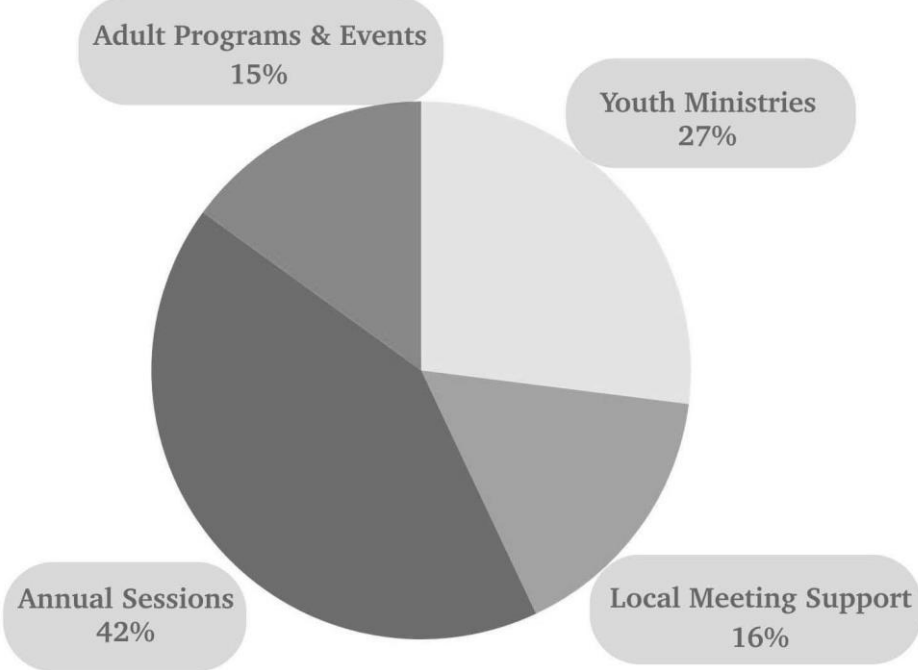
<sup>4</sup> This is an estimate informed by incomplete data from local meetings. Looking to update your meeting's statistical report or roster? Email [office@neym.org](mailto:office@neym.org) or go [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> These numbers are estimates based on contacts in our database gathered via local meetings and event participation. Proportional participation has historically changed slightly when Sessions sites have changed.

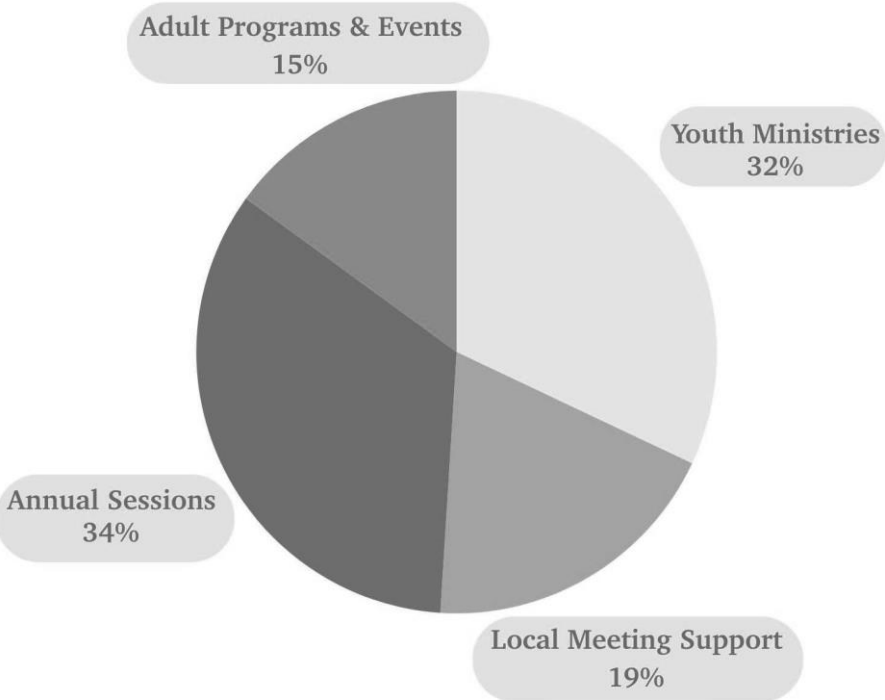
<sup>6</sup> NEYM's programs including Sessions are offered on a “pay as led” (sliding scale) basis. Registrants are given guidance in determining what to pay in the form of a “traditional” fee (the amount that traditionally would be charged), a “limited income” fee, and a “complete cost” fee, which covers a portion of the staff time and indirect costs that go into Sessions.

# Financial Factors Regarding Sessions

## 1 Annual Expenses by Program



## 2 Annual Percentage of Staff Time



**The bottom line is that it is not financially sustainable for NEYM to continue to operate using the current model.**

The financial footprint of the Annual Sessions of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends is significant in the context of the wider Yearly Meeting's operating budget, and in the organization's financial condition overall.

For context, out of NEYM's total annual budget of roughly \$877,000 in 2023, Sessions that year accounted for approximately 42% of total budgeted expenses, or almost \$377,000. After closing the fiscal year, Sessions 2024 was the primary contributor to a roughly \$62,000 operating deficit for the Yearly Meeting as a whole.

In comparison, a large one-day weekend opportunity such as Meeting Care Day, offered each fall, costs approximately 2% of the total cost of Annual Sessions in 2024, and drew 10% of the number of participants as Annual Sessions, many of them participating in a wider Friends activity beyond their local meeting for the first time.

### **What are the biggest financial challenges of the current model?**

The current Sessions financial picture is a complex one, as it is influenced by several major factors, including:

- The cost of room and board at a college or university campus—inflation and other rising costs for food, power, and more have meant significant increases in the past ten years
- The decreasing supply of campuses and institutions able and willing to host NEYM, given the breadth and level of our expectations and requirements under the current model
- Income foregone through offering fee waivers to a substantial portion of Sessions attenders serving in demanding Sessions volunteer roles
- The cost of time for the year-round NEYM staff to organize and conduct Sessions
- Rising costs related to increased accessibility, mobility, and medical needs, including hybrid activities, golf carts for shuttles, air-conditioned housing (during increasingly hot and humid New England summers) with appropriate elevator access
- The fixed costs paid to the host institution for use of non-housing spaces and facilities, which in most cases must be used and paid regardless of in-person attendance numbers, meaning there is a relatively hard limit to how low costs can be reduced while still operating with the current model
- Attenders' use of the pay-as-led model of Sessions fees, which has historically led to greater contributions from those who are able, but which has struggled to keep up with rising costs, even though giving from many households to support others' participation in Sessions has remained strong

In addition to the challenges bringing in sufficient income to cover the financial costs of Sessions, there is also a question of the “opportunity costs”—those things that, because we chose to invest energy, time, and money in something else, we will not be able to do.

The financial challenges now facing the current model for NEYM's Annual Sessions—and other similar Quaker events—are systemic and unsustainable, with ripple effects across the organization. Rising costs, decreasing host venue options, and increasing demands on both volunteer and staff time all highlight the unsustainable nature of the model. Even with substantial financial contributions from many Friends using the pay-as-led model and local meetings contributing generously towards equalization, the gap between costs and income continues to grow, exacerbating an already challenging financial condition.

This systemic imbalance doesn't only strain the Yearly Meeting's resources; it also limits the organization's ability to invest in new initiatives and fulfill its broader mission of nurturing thriving Friends meetings year-round. To address these challenges, a broad re-envisioning is essential. By aligning our approach with our purpose, our priorities, and our capacity, all under the guidance of the Spirit, we trust we can move toward a more sustainable and life-giving future.









# Possible Sessions Scenarios

The goal of this section is to outline some scenarios we could adopt for future Sessions, holding these realities with the impact of each. The intent is to share the thinking that has already been done to fuel deeper discernment on the shape of Sessions, not to limit the possibilities considered in our collective brainstorming

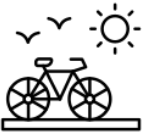
## Options:

From initial exploration, here are six possible models the Yearly Meeting might consider for future Sessions. Each has a potential impact on our ability to serve various populations of Friends as well as implications for Yearly Meeting staff time, Sessions-specific staffing (seasonal paid and volunteer roles), and the finances of the Yearly Meeting.

Those scenarios are:

	<b>Limited Housing:</b> Find another location that can accommodate us without the same amount of housing <sup>7</sup> .
	<b>Only Families On-Site:</b> Hold youth programs in person with housing for families, and adult programs virtually.
	<b>Entirely Online:</b> Hold Sessions entirely online.
	<b>Regional Network:</b> Hold regional events that are brought together virtually.
	<b>Shorter On-Site:</b> Significantly shorten the residential portion of Sessions to a length that is logistically and financially more attractive to Friends (e.g. a long weekend).
	<b>Every Other Year:</b> Hold Sessions in person every-other year rather than annually.

<sup>7</sup> Currently the vast majority of people at Sessions stay on campus in the dorms or camp on campus. A site that might otherwise support Sessions would require Friends making their own arrangements using resources identified by the YM. This could include commuting, connections with Friends in the local area willing to offer home stay or blocks of rooms at area hotels or nearby colleges, with far fewer people residing on site.



**#1 Limited housing:** Find another location that can accommodate early August dates without full housing.

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
High	Very High	Neutral	Unknown	Neutral to Positive	Neutral

Under this scenario Sessions would look very much like it does now except most Friends would not be living on the campus and would instead commute to Sessions on a daily basis.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknowns
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our Sessions infrastructure can be moved to a new location, including our hybrid set-up.</li> <li>• Youth programs would be able to occur in a central location. Parents could come together as they do now.</li> <li>• We would maintain the same scheduling pattern with Friends Camp, allowing attendance at both for many Young Friends. Assuming the site had enough on-campus housing for the Young Friends program, their experience would be very similar.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More time will be needed to walk each program/activity through their needs in a new site.</li> <li>• Many materials for Sessions would need to be re-written.</li> <li>• We would need to ensure sufficient parking for Friends with mobility challenges so the transition into and out of Sessions is smooth and welcoming.</li> <li>• We would need additional volunteers to help teach Friends how to navigate the site as a non-residential program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would Friends react to a non-residential Sessions?</li> <li>• How might the Young Friends program be impacted?</li> <li>• How do we communicate with Friends around housing options?</li> <li>• How will a non-residential affect Sessions fees and costs?</li> <li>• How do we welcome Friends onto campus in a way that supports community, programs, deep discernment?</li> <li>• Can we support Friends who find housing in the area cost-prohibitive? How?</li> </ul>



**#2 Only families on-site:** Hold Youth Programs in person with housing for parents/guardians and adult programs virtually

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
High	High	Neutral	Unknown	Neutral to Positive	Neutral

Under this scenario, families would be invited to attend Sessions in a residential setting with youth programs in-person. For adults, Sessions would be an online program of business meetings and other possible activities. Adults accompanying children participating at Sessions would be given a “pod” on the residential site from which they could join the online activities.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents/guardians/sponsors could gather in community as well amongst themselves on campus and with other adults online.</li> <li>• Friends understand what online Sessions would look like and we know how to do it.</li> <li>• There are likely more sites that could accommodate a smaller footprint.</li> <li>• Youth programs would still continue without interruption.</li> <li>• This would maintain the same scheduling pattern with Friends Camp, allowing attendance at both for many Young Friends.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is much harder to promote informal networking and relationship building among Friends when online.</li> <li>• Are Friends willing to join an online-only event in sufficient numbers for Sessions to succeed?</li> <li>• There would still be site costs for the on-campus portion of Sessions. Would that create a cost barrier for families in person or other adults online?</li> <li>• To be attractive to adults, we would likely need some on-site events outside of the large group events on Zoom. The shape of those and the effort to bring them together is unknown.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would a youth-and-family-only residential program make it easier or harder on families? (Finding sponsors, care from other family members, etc.)</li> <li>• Would adults joining online be willing to pay a fee that supported the youth programming?</li> <li>• How would we support intergenerational opportunities and relationships?</li> <li>• The youth programs would still need their usual number of staff, which could be hard to find if the general population of Friends are not on campus.</li> </ul>



### #3 Hold Sessions entirely online

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
Simplified	Low	Increased	Mixed	Negative	Mixed

Under this scenario, Sessions would work as it did in 2020 and 2021, with an online program of business meetings and other possible activities. Given the cultural changes since then, the shape of Sessions, the schedule, and timing might need to change considerably. Friends are more comfortable with Zoom, so there would need to be less education around that, yet Friends may not see the same value and connection from an online gathering as they did in the height of the pandemic.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Friends understand what an online Sessions would look like and we know how to do it.</li> <li>The costs of Sessions are very low and the staff needed for this sort of Sessions is well understood.</li> <li>There would be no need for a site search.</li> <li>There is an opportunity for youth to attend Friends Camp and connect with Friends at online Sessions in limited ways.</li> <li>Possibly, youth volunteers who normally attend Sessions would have more availability in their summer season to be involved at Camp.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families would not have an opportunity to gather together and there would probably not be an opportunity for youth programs. We did have online youth programs in the early pandemic but they were very challenging and youth seem to have far less interest in them now that things have opened up.</li> <li>We would not be able to have a bookstore.</li> <li>Informal conversations and socialization is much more challenging online than it is in person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Now that much of the world has opened back up, would Friends be willing to join an online-only event in large enough numbers that we would consider Sessions successful?</li> <li>What would be lost without shared meals and other informal connections?</li> </ul>



**#4 Regional network:** Hold regional events that are brought together virtually

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
Very High	Unknown	Very High	Very High	High	High

Under this scenario Sessions would be radically different with regional gatherings around New England all connected online.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It would provide a way for Friends to connect in smaller clusters if we could not find a large location to hold everyone.</li> <li>• There could be an opportunity for quarterly meetings to be more present and connected.</li> <li>• Friends might be more comfortable closer to home and knowing the location they will be in.</li> <li>• Our carbon footprint could be lower, with fewer Friends traveling across the region.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We would be at the mercy of each location's technical capability, resulting in many more points of potential connectivity failure.</li> <li>• We would be unable to provide the level of care around housing, food allergies, and other needs Friends may have.</li> <li>• Youth programs could be very uneven, depending on how many people participate in a given region. Finding sufficient volunteers to run multiple regional youth programs would likely require even more people power than our current programs and some regions may not have sufficient youth to attract a critical mass or offer age-specific programming.</li> <li>• People would have fewer opportunities to connect with Friends outside their region and the Yearly Meeting as a whole.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would we staff the various pods?</li> <li>• How would we coordinate the experience of Friends at different pods?</li> <li>• Where would the clerks table be? Would they be in one pod or distributed? How would that affect discernment?</li> <li>• Would this approach make Sessions more or less appealing to newcomers?</li> <li>• How would such a model impact quarterly meetings and Friends serving in quarterly meeting leadership roles?</li> </ul>



**#5 Shorter on-site:** Significantly shorten the residential portion of Sessions

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
Increased	High	Increased	Increased	Unknown	Unknown

Under this model Friends would still come together for a brief period but would not conduct all of Sessions at once. Some activities of Sessions would need to move to other times of the year or online.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A shorter gathering would reduce the logistical challenges and overhead of Sessions.</li> <li>• More sites could be available to hold Sessions.</li> <li>• Room and board fees would be lower.</li> <li>• Recruiting staff for a shorter event could be easier.</li> <li>• If Sessions were geographically close to Friends Camp and took place between the two teen camp sessions, there is the potential for more young people to participate.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a great deal of infrastructure that comes into setting up for Sessions. Would that make sense for a shorter event? How would we adjust?</li> <li>• Would a shorter event still allow for deep discernment and meaningful connection-making including among youth?</li> <li>• Many components of our current Sessions would need to be eliminated from the event. This could result in disappointment or conflict for Friends whose most cherished components of Sessions no longer happen.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would a shorter Session attract Friends who cannot attend a weeklong residential gathering?</li> <li>• Would a shorter Sessions fit in better with other summer caregiving arrangements (daycare, camps, etc)?</li> <li>• Would Sessions staffing needs change significantly?</li> <li>• Would a shorter gathering be significant enough that Friends felt they had come together as a community?</li> </ul>



## #6 Hold an in-person gathering every other year

Complexity	Financial Risk	Impact on YM Staff	Impact on Staffing	Allows for Youth Programs	Allows for Adult Programs
Increased	Unknown	Increased	Increased	Negative	Unknown

Under this model Friends would still come together for a residential program every other year and we would have an online only gathering on the alternate years.

Advantages	Cautions	Unknown
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We would only have the cost of a site and demands of an in-person event half as often</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It might be harder to find a site that will sign an every-other-year contract.</li> <li>Other groups that have tried this model are struggling with sustaining volunteers and finances.</li> <li>Especially for youth and young people, an every-other-year rhythm might disrupt the momentum of interest, relationships, and routine.</li> <li>We would all have to learn how to “do” Sessions every other year, requiring more staff and volunteer time and effort.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would the alternate year schedule affect discernment?</li> <li>If Sessions were not held in person every year, would Friends plan to come?</li> <li>How much learning would be lost by Friends between Sessions?</li> </ul>

For all these scenarios:

### **How would changes to Sessions affect Friends Camp?**

Friends Camp, an overnight summer camp in Maine, is a thriving youth ministry of NEYM which serves hundreds of youth each summer, Quaker and non-Quaker alike. Because many young people participate in both Friends Camp and Sessions, as we explore changes to Sessions, it makes sense to consider Friends Camp.

The primary factor affecting the interaction between Camp and Sessions is scheduling. As long as the dates overlap, Camp staff involvement will remain limited, and some youth will have to choose between attending Sessions or Camp. It's unlikely Camp would forgo an early August session due to financial constraints. And if the Yearly Meeting were to consider a different season for Sessions, we would have some significant known drawbacks to contend with: we would not be able to include youth and families to the same extent (because of the school year), we would likely have increased recruiting challenges (as many volunteers serve in part due to summer vacation time), and would not be able to use a college campus. The advantage of exploring such a significant change would be that it could open up new opportunities for collaboration between families and Camp and youth retreat staff, but the full extent of such a change is unknown.



# About Listening Sessions

Meeting and other groups will hold a Listening Session at a time of their choosing during the winter of 2025 (before April 1st). Although it will vary especially depending on group size, **we expect most groups will need about two hours** to hold the conversation at an unhurried pace.

## Reminders for all Listening Session participants

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. This means that reflections from all Friends, not only those who have participated in Sessions, can provide meaningful insight. If you are a Friend who has less familiarity with Annual Sessions, we invite you to consider how you may be an “angel of curiosity” for your group, asking illuminating questions that expand our thinking.
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. Similarly, as listeners we must remember that Individuals speak from their own experience and do not represent all others in a demographic of which they may be a part.
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. Although notetakers will be capturing notes that are shared back with the Yearly Meeting, they will not be including names of individual speakers.

## Guidance for facilitators

1. In developing this packet, these guidelines, and the prompts in the next section, we have aimed to strike a balance between providing enough consistency of structure between groups and enough space for facilitators to adjust to the needs of their particular group.
2. With welcoming words and a calm and attentive presence, create a warm and respectful atmosphere for listening and sharing.

3. Understand that Friends have varying experiences with and feelings about Sessions. For some, this may be a tender conversation.
4. Using the prompts as a gentle guide, keep the conversation on track.
5. Help participants share the time by drawing out quiet voices or asking Friends who speak frequently to spend more time listening.
6. As needed, remind Friends of the participation guidelines above (such as speaking from one's own experience).
7. If you personally feel the need to respond to a prompt, make it clear to the group that you are temporarily stepping out of the facilitation role and speaking as an individual.
8. If your group is large and you plan to break into smaller groups for some or all of the prompts, please identify facilitators and notetakers for each small group in advance so that the Friends in those roles feel adequately prepared to guide their small group.
9. Although some conversation will need to happen on Zoom or in a hybrid format, we encourage groups of Friends to physically gather when possible.

## **Guidance for Listening Group Notetakers**

1. **Each group needs to have at least one designated notetaker.** This could be the meeting's recording clerk or another Friend. Where possible, Friends may find it helpful to have two notetakers who can compile notes after the meeting and provide more listening "coverage." If your listening session takes place over Zoom and your group consents to using the "AI assistant" feature, the computer-generated summary should only be used as a way to cross check the completeness of notes taken by a human.
2. **Please make sure that all Friends know that notes will be taken and shared back with the Yearly Meeting.** Please do not include names of speakers or unnecessary identifying details.
3. If you personally feel the need to respond to a prompt, make it clear to the group that you are temporarily stepping out of the notetaking role and speaking as an individual.
4. While these notes will include more detail of what individuals shared than is generally the practice with meeting minutes, notes do not need to be verbatim. The goal is to summarize significant reflections that arise during the conversation. If certain statements seemed to carry particular energy for the group, it is helpful to note that (for example, "there were many nods of agreement when one Friend shared that ...").
5. Please organize notes by prompt number (see next section for list of prompts).
6. If possible, we encourage you to share the draft notes with participants after the listening session, asking if there are any major corrections or omissions.
7. Once complete, please submit your group's notes via the submission form on the website at [neym.org/sessions-visioning](http://neym.org/sessions-visioning).

8. Note that as you submit your notes you will be asked some general questions about who participated so we have some sense of what perspectives were included. You may wish to decide with the facilitator in advance of the Listening Session if you wish to verbally ask the group about these questions. Here is what you will be asked:
- a. How many people participated in this Listening Session? (please provide your best estimate)
  - b. Were there Friends present in the group who have attended NEYM Annual Sessions? (yes, no, unsure)
  - c. Were there Friends present in the group who have attended NEYM Annual Sessions in the past three years? (yes, no, unsure)
  - d. Were there Friends present in the group who have never attended NEYM's annual Sessions? (yes, no, unsure)
  - e. Were there Friends in the group who have been part of youth programs at Sessions as a participant or volunteer? (yes, no, unsure)
  - f. Were there Friends in the group who have attended another Yearly Meeting's Sessions or the Friends General Conference Gathering? (yes, no, unsure)
  - g. Were there Friends in your group who are currently under 19 years of age? (yes, no, not sure)
  - h. Were there Friends in your group between the ages of 19–39 years? (yes, no, not sure)
  - i. Were there Friends in your group between the ages of 40–65 years? (yes, no, not sure)
  - j. Were there Friends in your group ages 66 and older? (yes, no, not sure)
  - k. Were there Friends in your group who are currently parenting children or teens? (yes, no, unsure)

# Listening Group Prompts

Timing note: If your group allocates two hours for this conversation, that will allow 15 minutes for each of the six overarching prompts plus 15 minutes of worship at both the opening and the closing of the conversation.

1. Opening go-around:
  - a. Each person is invited to share something that stood out to them reading the background materials and one change to Sessions they would make if they had a magic wand.
  - b. As the time available and the size of your group allows, this initial sharing could also include briefly describing their relationship to/personal history with Sessions or anything else they would like the group to know as the conversation begins.
  
2. What has life:
  - a. Throughout the year and at Annual Sessions, Quakers in New England from various meetings come together for corporate discernment, worship, fellowship, learning, and witness<sup>8</sup>. What about these regional gatherings has particular life for you and your community?
  - b. What is a gift you and your meeting experience (directly or indirectly) from these opportunities?
  
3. Possible adaptations:
  - a. As you reflect on the background materials and the condition of Friends meetings and individual Friends you know, what stands out to you as an ideal yet sustainable version of Sessions and/or Yearly Meeting activities that would contribute to the overall spiritual health of Friends in New England?
  
4. Indicators:
  - a. As the Yearly Meeting moves towards new approaches, what indicator that we are on the right path feels especially important to pay attention to?
  - b. Conversely, what is something we need to be prepared to hold lightly, let go of, or intentionally not prioritize for the time being?
  
5. Reflection on unity:
  - a. What did you hear underneath the words in this conversation?
  - b. Where in this conversation did there seem to be unity?
  - c. Where in this conversation were there perspectives or values that seem to be in tension?

---

<sup>8</sup> Events formally organized by NEYM include retreats for youth and young adults, Meeting Care Day, Living Faith, Meeting for Listening, Monthly Meeting Leader Calls, and various interest groups and workshops.

- d. What questions does the group still seem to be wrestling with in relation to this topic?
6. Closing go-around:
- a. Each person is invited to share what is on their heart and mind coming away from this conversation. This could include acknowledging a feeling, a new insight, a hope, or a prayer.

## Participation in Visioning Day

Following the Listening Sessions, each group holding a Listening Session is invited to send one or two Friends to Visioning Day held on April 12th at Wellesley (MA) Meeting. This is where the reflections from all groups will be distilled and carried forward into discernment. From there, a report will be developed, shared back, and collectively refined throughout the spring and early summer and then brought to Friends at Sessions this August 2025.

For many groups, it may make sense for the facilitator and notetaker to be the ones to consider attending Visioning Day. As your group selects a representative, please consider this wisdom:

*Sometimes we send representatives from smaller groups to larger ones. When we do that, representatives to the larger groups should be chosen by their ability to discern, not by their steadfast loyalty to local meeting positions. They need to practice discernment together and not be bound by the views of the group they're representing.*

- Emily Provance, summarizing wisdom drawn from assorted Yearly Meetings, on her blog *Turning, Turning: Holy Experiments Among Friends*.

Friends who have been selected by their meeting or group to attend the Visioning Day may register at [neym.org/sessions-visioning](https://neym.org/sessions-visioning).

## With Gratitude

If you have read this far, thank you. This process would not be possible without the engagement and care of Friends like you. Thank you to each participant and to the individuals who made each Listening Group possible: the facilitators, notetakers, elders, conversation partners, Zoom hosts, meetinghouse stewards, cooks, childcare providers.

We would especially like to thank the Friends whose contributions make this packet possible: Anna Hopkins Buller, Susan Davies, Maggie Fiori, Elizabeth Hacala, Sara Hubner, Betsy Cadzen, Merrill Kohlhofer, Alison Levie, Rebecca Leuchak, Martha Mangelsdorf, Frederick Martin, Noah Merrill, Steve Mohlke, Emily Provance, Matt Southworth, Jackie Stillwell, Nia Thomas, Phil Veatch, Carl Williams, and Morgan Wilson.

In getting this far, we have found many reasons to thank the countless Friends who have come before, practicing our Faith and offering the dedicated service that has brought our Sessions to life for 364 years.

May the care we put into this discernment be a gift to the Friends who will come next.

More information is available at [neym.org/sessions-visioning](https://neym.org/sessions-visioning).

If any additional questions arise related to this packet or process, please contact Program Director Nia Thomas at [nia@neym.org](mailto:nia@neym.org).