

Report on Sessions Visioning

May 2025

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Background

As Quakers from across New England gathered for our Annual Sessions last August (2024), Friends approved embarking on a year-long consultation and discernment process to re-envision our Annual Sessions, the largest and longest gathering for Friends in our region. Through informed dialogue, reflection, and worshipful discernment we hope to re-align, revitalize, and “right size” Sessions to reflect current needs and resources. We don’t approach this merely as an opportunity to improve an event. Instead, this is a conversation about how our Yearly Meeting’s practice of corporate discernment, our relationships with other Quakers, and use of limited resources can most meaningfully contribute to the spiritual thriving of Friends across New England.

The report below is a summary of the dialogue, distillation, and discernment that has taken place among Friends in recent months.

About the role of Listening Group notes

Discernment requires that we invite God into the place where we are now—including our current perceptions, our honest feelings, our truest intentions, and our best thinking. Taking the time to engage with each other in dialogue and gather rich information allows us to offer all of this up in discernment. In this way, dialogue and informational analysis are not replacements for corporate discernment but powerful aids to it.

It is for this reason that in early 2024 the Sessions Visioning Working Group designed a discernment process that involved ample dialogue among Friends and why qualitative analysis methods were used in developing the brief visual summary of takeaways from the Listening Group notes, which you will find below.

Listening Group notes and summary

Over the course of the winter, Friends were invited to gather in Listening Groups (such as with their local meeting or quarter) to reflect on background information related to Sessions and to explore reflection prompts and alternative models.

Following these conversations, point people from each Listening Group submitted notes and general information about who participated in their conversation. The NEYM Office Manager compiled the notes, assigning a reference number to each paragraph or bullet point.

A “Data Analysis Team” comprised of three Friends with qualitative data analysis experience (Merrill Kohlhofer of North Shore, Liesa Stamm of Hartford, and Nia Thomas of Northampton) independently coded the data for themes and illustrative quotes. From there, the visual summary found at the end of this document was created.

Interested in a deeper understanding of the conversations held across our region? The compilation of all notes received from Listening Groups, listed in the order in which they were received, is available at neym.org/sessions-visioning. Please note, the summary only includes notes received by April 1st, although notes received after that date are included in the compilation document.

About Visioning and Distillation Day

On April 12, 2025, fifty-two Friends came together from the eight quarters of the Yearly Meeting, gathering at Wellesley Meeting for a Visioning and Distillation Day (also referred to as “Visioning Day” for short). Not all listening groups were able to send someone to attend and a couple of registrants were kept away due to an unexpected snow storm. Still, for most listening groups there was someone who was able to be part of the gathering.

Discernment, sharing, exploration, and reflection took many forms during the day. Friends engaged in structured activities and shared with one another during small group conversation reflecting on takeaways from the listening group conversations, possible models for Sessions, and related “big picture” questions these topics invite. Periods of the day in the morning and afternoon were spent in full group worship sharing. The following is a summary of that reflection.

Summary of worshipful reflections from Visioning Day

Morning Reflection

The foundation of New England Yearly Meeting is strengthened by attending deeply to the relationships between local and quarterly meetings. Strengthening these interconnections can better prepare us for our shared work at Sessions.

One tension explored was the tension in broadly participatory and extended discernment processes. How do we pay attention to the resonance of God's call to us, even if it is found in a "minority opinion"?

One significant tension we observed among Friends is the perceived divide between the business, social, and worship aspects of Sessions. Yet all are essential, and a healthy balance nourishes our life together. Out of shared worship and fellowship emerge the grounded choices and Spirit-led actions of our business.

Another core tension is the limitation of time. If we aim to make Sessions more accessible by shortening the length, do we risk losing the depth of discernment that requires spaciousness—to settle, listen, wrestle, and come to unity? The quality of our corporate discernment is often closely tied to the time we give it. However, this time need not be confined solely to Sessions themselves. Deeper preparation — through committee work, advance reporting, personal reflection, and discernment within monthly and quarterly meetings—can allow us to arrive more ready, in a spirit of disciplined, gathered centering.

This leads us to ask: what truly needs to happen during Yearly Meeting Sessions? Might we reimagine the structure, timing, and components of Sessions so that we honor all necessary functions while also allowing for more intentional and sacred space?

Underlying all these questions is a deeper inquiry: What does it mean to be a Yearly Meeting? The purpose of coming together is not merely to enjoy familiar company or complete business, but to gather in the presence of the Divine—to be broken open by God, shaped together as a people of God.

A powerful image emerged repeatedly: New England Friends on a pilgrimage. The journey we are on as we come to Sessions is collective. It is a time-honored path which involves deep spiritual preparation prior to arrival into the gathered community. We must hold close to this pilgrimage vision. As one Friend asked: Do we come together as “just people” (individuals)—or as *a people* of God, called together? It is through shared pilgrimage that Friends find our way into discipleship.

As we reflected on the time we spend together at Sessions and in other Yearly Meeting activities, several voices emphasized the need for smaller gatherings, smaller group opportunities, and relationship-building spaces to help cultivate intimacy and trust. These interpersonal connections are difficult to build in large Meetings for Business but are essential for meaningful corporate discernment. Smaller group interactions help us deepen understanding and shared purpose.

Amid all these reflections, one unifying theme was the essential importance of gathering as a body. Drawing on Barclay, one Friend offered the image of many candles gathered together—their shared light far greater than that of a single flame. This shared experience of being part of something greater than ourselves allows us to carry that gathered light back into our monthly meetings and daily lives.

A vision was shared of all ages woven together as one body—not with younger Friends sidelined so older Friends can do “the work,” but each person seen as whole, vital, and beloved. Our work must reflect that vision of unity and interdependence.

Our life together as Friends in NEYM is not about simply completing business. It is about uniting as the people of God, seeking together what it means to live into our shared faith, and being corporately and individually open to the leadings of the Spirit.

Afternoon Reflection

We were given the image of Sessions as a trustworthy ship. It has carried Friends forward for years. While we’ve experienced favorable conditions and financial sustainability in the past, we now have hit doldrums. What adjustments do we make?

Sessions is a vessel we are committed to making use of, but we recognize that designing its best form given current challenges will likely require flexibility, curiosity, and willingness to experiment and learn as we go. It will also require faith that all we do is held by Spirit. There is a hope for this experimental approach to not only be applied to the form of Sessions but also to other activities of the Yearly Meeting. Sessions is part of a bigger whole.

For some, a primary aim of experimenting with the shape of Sessions is to increase participation. What changes will eliminate the barriers we can and to welcome more Friends into the spiritual richness available?

A meaningful aspect of the richness we find as we gather as a Yearly Meeting is the spiritual intimacy we find when we are able to see and love each other deeply. How much time does this take? In addition to time, our ability to relate in this way may depend on other factors like who we are, what we contribute, and how we prepare.

Some Friends are ready to experimentally try a shortened Sessions schedule over a long weekend in 2026. While there was sadness at the prospect of truncating the duration of Sessions, Friends named a hope that experimenting with this model could increase attendance and accessibility as well as save money for both individuals and the Yearly Meeting. Many hope this option could be considered within dynamic conjunction with midyear gatherings and year-round opportunities for discernment.

For other Friends, shortening Sessions does not feel like the right path. Some hold a strong conviction that keeping a longer Sessions uniquely and essentially fulfills our need for deep, patient discernment and worship. Would it be better to keep the length but to “strip down” other resource-intensive aspects such as by limiting the housing provided by the Yearly Meeting? Have we made assumptions that have closed us off to this possibility? As the time we had set aside to be together elapsed on Visioning Day, we did not find sense of the meeting. We welcomed God to be with us in what felt like a messy place.

While holding these questions about the form of Sessions, we observed that Annual Sessions is already inadequate to fully complete both the business before the Yearly

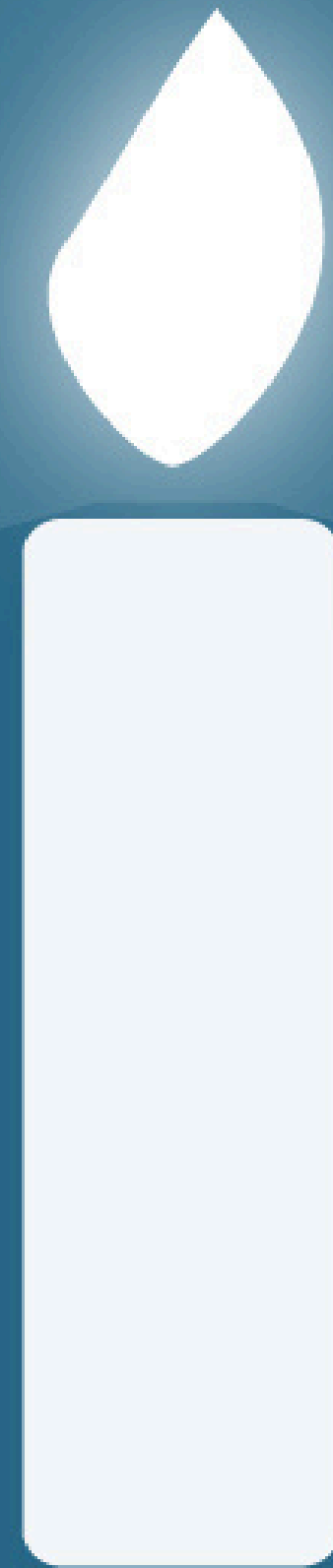
Meeting as well as to cultivate the depth of relationship we are called to as fellow pilgrims on a shared path. It is clear that any successful reimagined Sessions plan must concurrently depend on robust year-round gatherings and the activation, inclusion, and investment of a broad body of Friends throughout the whole year. Some important, valued activities or aspects we have come to expect at Sessions may be fulfilled in other ways. There are many creative ideas among Friends about how we could continue to grow in this direction.

In discerning a revised Sessions form, it is critical that Sessions planners attend to how our time together can help us live into our deepest purposes. At Visioning Day, Friends named several vital aims: fostering spiritual intimacy; engaging in deep corporate discernment; cultivating loving fellowship; and experiencing the presence and guidance of God together, being open to transformation through ongoing revelation. Friends also lifted up the importance of enrichment, education, and meaningful connection for children and young Friends—indeed, for Friends of all ages and experiences. We seek to witness one another's light, to discern and strengthen ministries and callings, and to practice sustainable stewardship of our resources—financial, human, spiritual, and environmental. Underpinning all of this is a shared commitment to the inclusion of diverse Friends, honoring the range of needs and resources present in our community.

A brief visual summary

Sessions Visioning 2025: Takeaways from Listening Group Notes

Complete notes available at neym.org/sessions-visioning





Listening Groups

Amesbury	Junior Yearly Meeting	Providence
Beacon Hill	Junior High	Putney
Bennington	Lawrence with Evangelical Friends	Sandwich Monthly Meeting
Burlington	Monadnock	Storrs
Discernment Day Participants	Mount Toby	Vassalboro Quarter
Dover Quarter	North Shore	Wellesley
Falmouth Quarter	Northampton (#1)	Westerly
Framingham	Northampton (#2)	Westport
Fresh Pond with Three Rivers	Northwest Quarter	Winthrop Center
Cambridge	Parents (#1)	Worcester
Hanover	Parents (#2)	Young adult Friends Midwinter
Hartford	Portland	Young Friends

How many Listening Groups were there?

36 groups total*

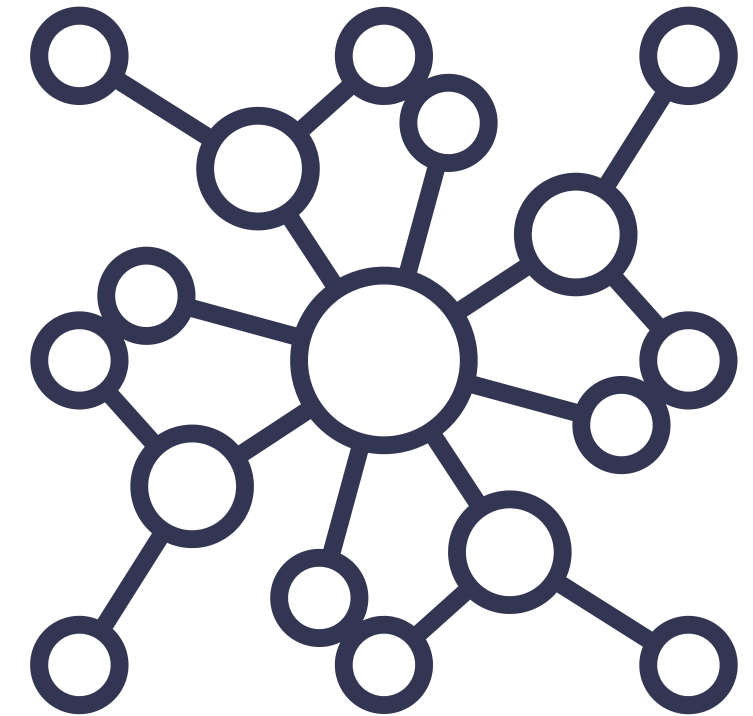
- There were groups in all 8 quarters
- Most groups were local meetings
- Some groups were quarters or pairs of local meetings
- Some groups were life-stage based: Elementary age youth (JYM), middle school age youth (JHYM), high school age youth (Young Friends), young adults (ages 18-35), and Friends currently parenting children and teens
- * this total reflects all groups that submitted notes by the April 1st deadline



How many Friends participated?

449 Friends*

- Group size varied from 4 (not including facilitator and notetaker) to 27.
- The average group size was 12.5
- All groups included people who had attended Sessions in the last three years
- Between 25-33%** of groups included people who have never attended Sessions
- 87% percent of groups included people who have participated in or volunteered for youth programs at Sessions
- At least 87% of groups included people who have attended FGC or other Yearly Meetings



*Each Listening Group point person was asked to share their best estimate of the number of participants and this number reflects the total of these estimates. Some estimates include facilitators, elders, notetakers, and invited “conversation partners” and some do not. A small number of Friends participated in more than one group.

**Demographic data was reported by each group’s point person. Some questions allowed the responses “yes”, “no”, or “don’t know”. Percent ranges are provided where some responses included “don’t know” answers.

What ages were Listening Group participants?

14-19%* of groups included youth (up to age 18)

42-46%* of groups included younger adults (ages 19-39)

92% of groups included adults ages 40-65

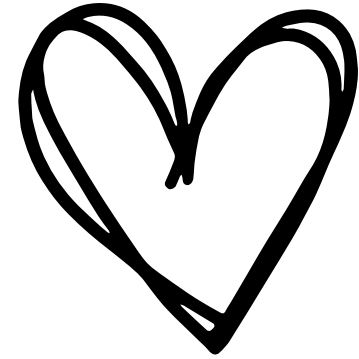
97% of groups included Friends over the age of 65**

56% of groups included Friends currently parenting children or teens

*Reminder: Demographic data was reported by each group's point person. Some questions allowed the responses "yes", "no", or "don't know". Percent ranges are provided where some responses included "don't know" answers.

**The one group reporting no participant over 65 was not including the facilitator and notetaker in their reporting.

Some form of Annual Sessions has great value for many Friends. There are many aspects of Sessions Friends cherish.



In particular...



- **Connecting meaningfully with other Friends**
- **Connecting to a diversity of Friends' experiences and learning from each other's journeys**
- **Contact between local meetings**
- **Feeling part of something bigger**
- **Small group experiences in various forms including around witness/social action**

- **Worship & other spiritual nourishment (such as Bible Half Hours, plenary)**
- **Multigenerational connections including in joyful ways (such as singing)**
- **Programming specifically for youth and families**
- **Shared meals**
- **Being together while separate from our daily lives**



Potential changes brought up different feelings for Friends.

Many Friends who attended Sessions regularly shared:

- Precious memories
- Transformational experiences
- Lasting Friendships
- A yearning to return to a “golden” era
- Feelings of loss at the prospect of change

....at the same time, many Friends shared acknowledgement (and even hope and excitement) regarding the need for change in light of challenges as well as a sense that Sessions had become “too much”

Friends have had differing experiences with....

Being a newcomer at Sessions

Some first time attenders had warm, wonderful, and even life-changing experiences...

...others felt overwhelmed, under-welcomed, or put off by various aspects of Sessions

Hybrid or online discernment

Some Friends find the accessibility that online participation provides as not only convenient and cost effective but essential to our ability to inclusively connect as Yearly Meeting...

...others find it unengaging, limiting, and unsatisfactory for community building and discernment.

The centrality of corporate discernment:

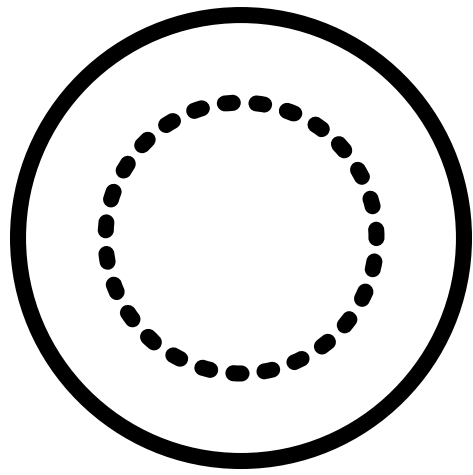
Two different perspectives among Friends



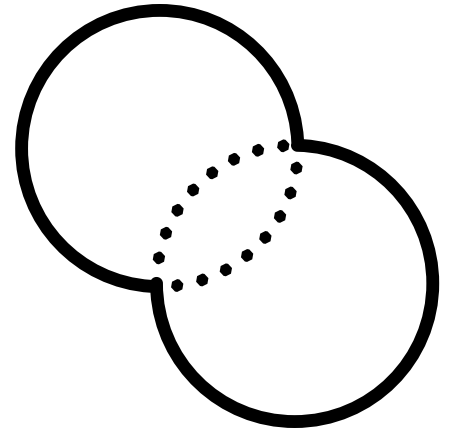
Some Friends clearly see meeting with attention to business as the central purpose of Sessions, as it has been historically



Other Friends see meeting with attention to business as an activity that happens as part of Sessions



Differing perspectives on Meeting for Business (continued)



“Tension exist between Business Meeting remaining central or if Business Meeting should be done outside of Sessions”

“If we sheer off the Meeting for Business into a separate event, we eliminate some of the strongest inducements for participation. We set it apart, perhaps implying that business is not for everyone. And this approach might be a way to avoid rather than address conflict. Peaceable conflict resolution should be Friends’ greatest strength.”

“Separate the business meeting from what Sessions means for most people.”

“Use the youth programs as a guide for how to run Yearly Meeting programs for all of us: focus on joy and love, connecting with others, processing our experiences, brief/focused business, and worship”

“Is there a way to expand how we approach discernment so that it is beyond business meetings? Small conversation circles like this are more connective and accessible than business meeting, especially if you are new to most of the agenda items.”

“For some, a desire to free up space by having less business meeting. For others, a concern about delegating more business to Permanent Board, which could ‘flatten’ the voices participating.”

“Motivation for Sessions attendance is to be with other Quakers and meet people. It is about community building, not Business Meeting.”

“Meeting for Business can provide an important understanding of Quaker process and the questions facing our Society.”

There is widely held desire to change things about our approach to corporate discernment.

Key Suggestions:

Friends want less time on business during Sessions and fewer agenda items during the business allowing for more spacious discernment

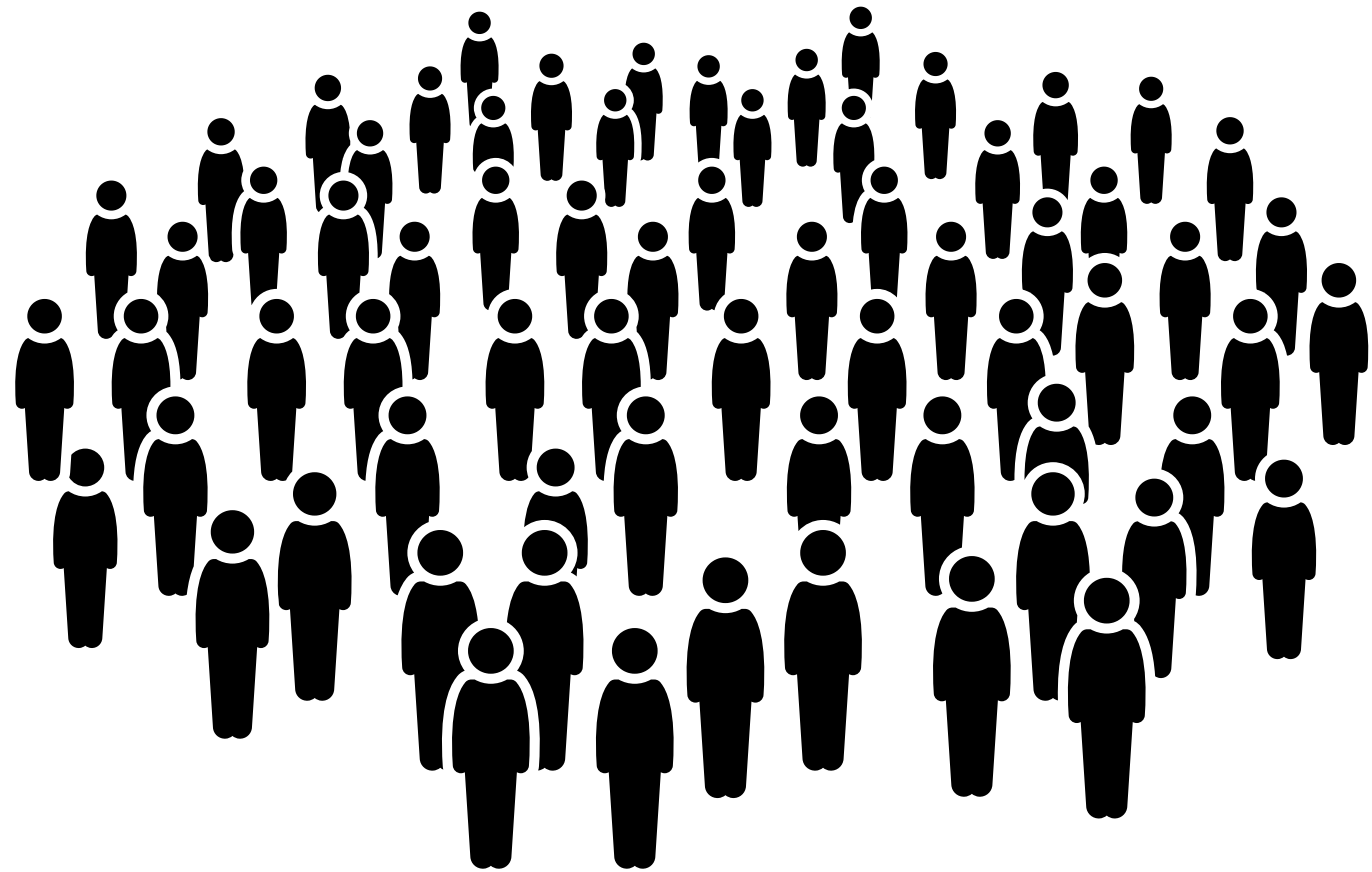
Different ideas were presented about how to make this shift. Season all agenda items via quarters? Give more business to Permanent Board? Revitalize the old meeting representatives model? Gather midyear? More business online? Let committees make more decisions?

Across groups, Quarterly Meeting was mentioned 84 times.

A throughline across the various suggestions was a desire for a smaller group (or groups) to take on more business on behalf of the whole in order to free up space at Sessions.

It is important to Friends that this smaller group(s) has a living connection to (and from) local meetings.

Many groups discussed the issue of attendance.

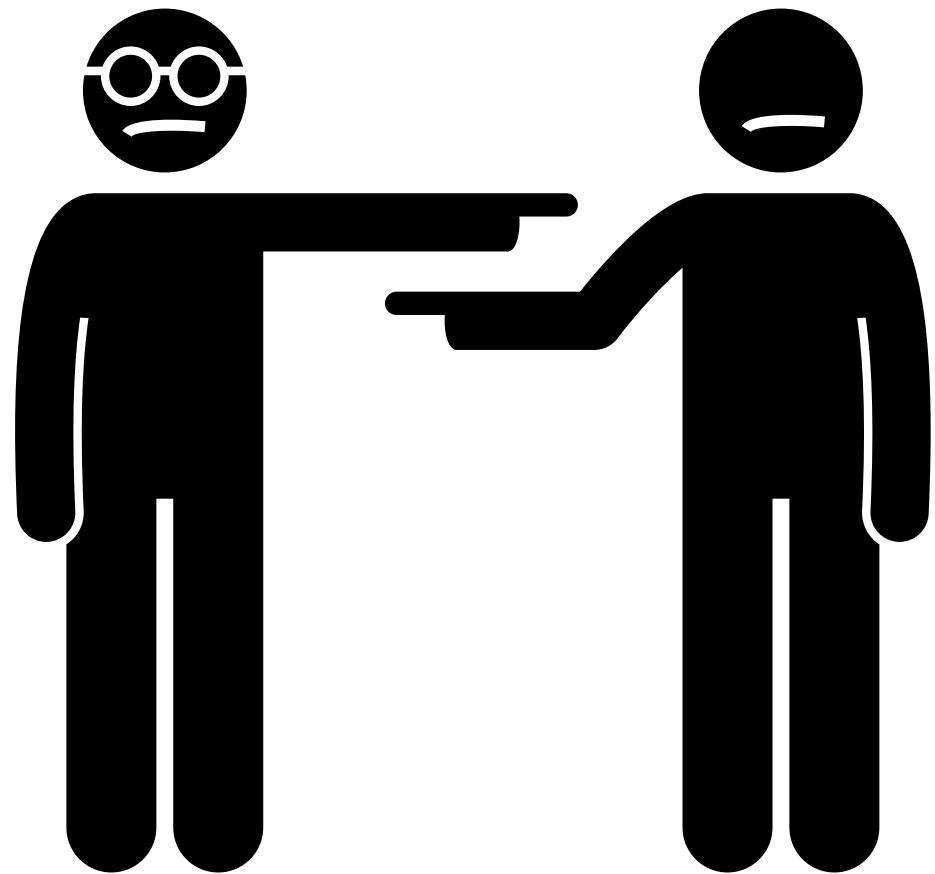


- Attendance at Sessions is limited by work schedules/busyness/other commitments; cost (even with pay as led), distance (in part because of the time this adds to attendance)
- There's widespread desire to increase attendance—it was named as key to financial sustainability and overall health
- Many Friends who have never attended Sessions felt that the commitment required to attend was too high and also that the “why” regarding why they should attend was not clear
- It was noted that not only is more broadcast communication about Sessions needed but also that there is a need for more personal outreach. In particular, the role of individuals and local meetings in encouraging and supporting first time attendance is needed



Most common concerns with the current model of Sessions:

- “Too much” (trying to do too many things, competing purposes, hectic)
- Too expensive (“sticker shock” even with Pay as Led)
- Too far (when its not located near you)
- Too long (for those with limited time off or limited energy for big gatherings)
- Overwhelming (especially for some newcomers and introverts)
- Hard to “sell” or explain to newer Friends
- Overall, Friends discussed the desire to “simplify” Sessions but didn’t consistently agree on how



Many Friends felt it would be great if more people would...

- Be willing to camp out or go without “creature comforts” during Sessions in order to lower the cost
- Give more money to the Yearly Meeting
- Volunteer at and before Sessions

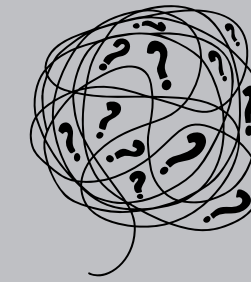
Other things that stood out in reading group notes:



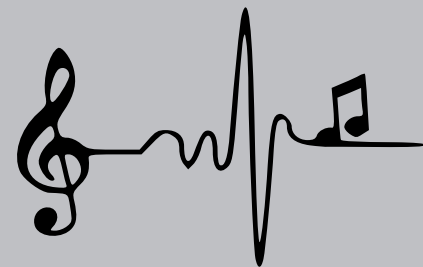
For a number of Friends, the background information about Sessions and NEYM was surprising



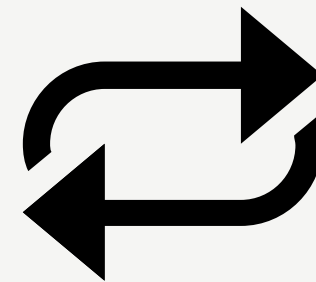
For a number of Friends, their understanding of Sessions and NEYM structures and activities was outdated



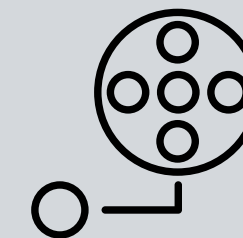
For a number of Friends, the form and function of Permanent Board is unclear



The tone of the responses was very different across groups. We are not all in the same place as we consider changes.



Although there were many different ideas shared, we do feel we reached the “saturation point”, the point at which key themes kept repeating



In a few regards, Portland Meeting was an outlier. While many groups stressed the importance of worship, the Portland group was distinct in that they found unity to move towards a fully volunteer led event, very stripped down and making worship central.



Most disliked option: Online only Sessions

- Many Friends shared that in-person connections are primary to their experience of Sessions
- Many Friends find physically gathering especially important for youth and families, informal connection-making, and shared meals
- Many Friends also disliked the idea of only having youth and families meet in-person which limits multigenerational relationship building
- A number of Friends also found the “every other year” option included too many uncertainties and would strain youth relationships

Most supported alternative model: Make Sessions shorter



- For many groups, they felt making Sessions a long-weekend would lower costs and increase availability of participants and volunteers
- For long-time attenders, many felt this option would require the least change
- Some saw this option as pairing well with midyear gatherings, including increasing attendance at quarterly meetings
- Many expressed a hope that the shorter time spent together would be focused on connection-making and spiritual nourishment
- The biggest concerns/questions with this option are:
 - Will it provide enough time for youth to bond?
 - What will we do with the business that doesn't get done?



The second most affirmed alternative: Limited Housing

Friends liked that....

By choosing a location many Friends could commute to the overall cost of Sessions would decrease

They liked the options this would give individuals and the possibility for some Friends to still have a residential experience

But Friends also worried about...

All the details brought up questions. Who would get housing? What location is “central” and affordable? Would we still have shared meals? How would this change fees to individuals? How would this impact youth programs?

Many Friends discussed the Sessions location:

Many Friends see both the cost of renting facilities and travel distance to Sessions as significant barriers to participation at Sessions. They think that a shorter distance would allow working people to attend part-time and therefore increase attendance and that a cheaper venue is key to decreased cost.



That being said, Friends had many differing ideas about what the ideal location for Sessions would be including: a camp ground, Boston, a Friends School (such as Moses Brown), the Great Meetinghouse (in Newport, RI), a cruise ship, a high school, a new facility we build.

Friends also discussed their hopes for the ways Friends gather throughout the year:

**For connection,
worship, and
learning:**

**For discernment,
decision-making,
and service:**

**Within regions
and Quarters:**

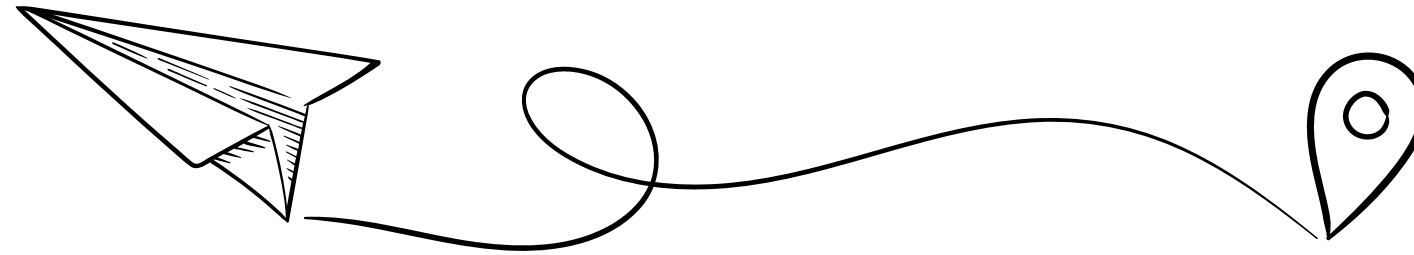
Many Friends expressed appreciation for shorter NEYM gatherings with a focus on fellowship, connection, worship, learning, and witness

Many Friends wondered how simplifying Sessions would impact mid-year discernment.

Some Friends discussed the impact of midyear Yearly Meeting events on midyear gatherings offered by quarters.

According to Friends, these are the indicators we are on the right track in re-envisioning Sessions

Increased attendance	Increased sustainability	Spiritual health	Relational health
More newcomers & diversity	Financial sustainability	Truth prospering at Sessions	Collaboration between local meetings
More young people	Enough volunteers for key roles	Increased ability to hold both grief and joy	Deepening trust, engagement, communication
More families	Working within staff capacity	Patience with our mistakes	A sense of moving forward together with God



Emerging themes and directions:

- **Let's consider trying a shorter Sessions, over a long weekend and paired with care for year-round connection**
- **Let's explore how to foster opportunities for togetherness and shared meals as we approach housing options**
- **Sessions should have a strong emphasis on spiritual formation and small groups**
- **We need to shorten the total hours of business meetings at Sessions; allow more spacious discernment on fewer and more substantive matters**
- **Other business, especially organizational/administrative business, can be conducted by another body--with particular attention to the connection of this discernment to local meetings**
- **Pay attention to the health of quarters; they are essential for relationship and seasoning business**
- **Pay attention to the particular needs of youth and families for high-quality time together--and with other Friends**
- **Any change will be imperfect and require learning along the way**