

# **Reviving Our Meetings as Multi-Generational Communities**

## **A Draft Joint Grant Request of New York and New England Yearly Meetings**

### **New York Yearly Meeting:**

One of the hallmarks of a thriving monthly meeting is a vibrant First Day School. Yet many of our meetings have no First Day School, or only a marginal one, with few children, irregular attendance, and large disparities in the age of the children, making meaningful programming difficult. Those meetings are concerned about their future, and rightly so.

Our Priorities Working Group, which visited every monthly meeting and worship group in the yearly meeting, consistently heard that the lack of a vibrant First Day School was one of the greatest challenges our meetings face. Our meetings have been asking for help with curricula, with knowing how to retain the young families which do show up, with restarting a First Day School when it has dwindled to nothing, with effective outreach in general, but with outreach to young families in particular.

Our Young Adult Field Secretary has had a marked positive impact on young adults better integrating into the community life of our monthly meetings. She has also fielded persistent urgent pleas for help from parents of young children, pleas for help with meaningful curricula or programs which nurture the spiritual lives of their children, pleas for help with meetings' unconscious lack of welcome for young families, pleas for help with multi-generational worship, pleas for support and counsel. Many of those requests have fallen well outside of her job description and available work hours.

New York Yearly Meeting asks for the support of the Shoemaker Fund as we seek to learn how best to address these crucial needs. We are planning an integrative program involving a Children and Youth Field Secretary staff position, Youth Institutes, and support to monthly meetings in their outreach work. The staff person would work with monthly meetings, helping them to become not just child-tolerant, but assertively child-positive environments. That person would also serve as a locus, point person, catalyst and networker, helping individuals and monthly meetings to share best practices and learning experiences. The Youth Institutes would be held once or twice a year, moving around the yearly meeting, offering hands-on training in how to work effectively with children of all ages, training First Day School teachers and their supporting committees. Our outreach support would be for advertising expense, and other expenses associated with a meeting's doing a Quaker Quest program, or a scaled down version of Quaker Quest, called "Seeking the Spirit," created by an NYYM Friend.

In addition to offering general support as needed through the staff person and Youth Institutes, we envision giving concerted, focused attention to three to five pilot project monthly meetings. These would include at least one meeting with no First Day School, one meeting with a marginal First Day School, and one with a relatively thriving First Day School.

We are clear that we, and the rest of the Society of Friends, are low on the learning curve as to how to achieve the goal of a vibrant multi-generational community, especially where a meeting's demographic has shifted to where everyone there is 50

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years old or older. We anticipate learning a great deal as we go, and will make our learnings available to the wider Society at the end of our three year project.

### **Collaboration:**

We seek to approach this learning opportunity in collaborative partnership with New England Yearly Meeting. Through the work of our Young Adult Field Secretary, we have learned a tremendous amount about integrating young adults into the fabric of our community. NEYM is seeking to hire an analogous staff person. Through their Religious Education and Outreach Coordinator position, NEYM has learned a great deal about nurturing our youngest Friends, their families, and their meetings. We are seeking to hire an analogous staff person. Should our joint grant be approved, we would each offer to mentor the other yearly meeting's staff person, and to routinely share what we are learning with each other. This would allow for cross-fertilization, the sharing of what has worked and what has not, and would allow for a strategic diversity of approaches, where that seems desirable.

NYYM would commit to offering mentoring and support to NEYM's staff person addressing the needs of NEYM young adult Friends. Our staff person would co-facilitate retreats with the NEYM person, both in NEYM and in NYYM. She would also be available for regular support, debriefing, and coaching, both in person and via telecommunication.

### **The Staff Position:**

The Children and Youth Field Secretary position would address the needs of children and youth under the age of eighteen at a monthly meeting level, providing resources and networking support for religious education and spiritual care of our children and their families. We believe this position would help children and their parents to integrate more fully into the lives of our monthly meetings and thereby enrich those communities many times over. This would be a .7 FTE position.

The Child and Youth Field Secretary would:

- provide religious education resources and teacher support for children 0-18
- nurture intergenerational community
- support arriving families
- develop programs that will welcome new families

That person would also:

- \* Be a locus and central person to help field requests/concerns and to advocate for the spiritual nurture of youth and their parents.
- \* Support and work with Regional Meetings to promote regionally based support for nurture of youth.
- \* Help nurture the spiritual lives of the children in MM, RM and YM.
- \* Support parents as they seek to be part of MMs which are not always sensitive to their needs.
- \* Support the Youth Committee in structuring regional RE conferences/ Youth Institutes.

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- \* Bring programs to monthly meetings to help discern the role or place of youth in their meetings.
- \* Work with monthly meetings to prepare them to revive their First Day School programs when they are marginal or absent.
- \* Work with monthly meetings to help them engage in more effective outreach efforts.

### **Youth Institutes:**

We recently hosted our first Youth Institute. By any measure, it was a huge success, inspiring, energizing, empowering and informing those committed to the development of our youngest Friends and their full participation in our meetings. Discussion is already underway as to how to replicate this event in various locales across the yearly meeting. The greatest barrier to doing so is the need for a staff person to do the organizational work for these vital events.

For a sense of the focus, here are some excerpts from the Summary Report, attached:

*The objectives of the institute were to provide take home skills, broaden and deepen connections among Friends, and to uplift a multigenerational approach to youth programming... The institute was intentionally held simultaneously with the Friends General Conference Faith and Play training workshop led by Melinda Bradley to make optimal use of the Powell House facilities and to allow for those working with youth to intermingle during meals and free times. Between the two programs there were 40 participants from 22 monthly meetings and 3 yearly meetings. 25% of the participants were under 25 years old and about 15% were mid-sixties and up. 30 participants including all of the younger friends were in the Youth institute...*

*Plenary sessions of the youth institute consisted of worship through community building activities and games intermingled with small group discussions...*

*We offered six 90-minute workshops during the day on Saturday:*

- *Creativity and Spirituality*
- *Spiritual Development in Youth*
- *Using Games in Spiritual Work*
- *Teens and Quakerism Today*
- *Exploring Sex and Gender Issues*
- *Service/Learning Projects: Identifying and Leading*

### **Conclusion:**

NYYM has devoted much time and energy over many years exploring how to better help our monthly meetings to find renewal as vibrant, multi-generational communities. Over the last four years, our Young Adult Field Secretary has accelerated that learning, and has helped us to grow towards this goal. She has also alerted us to the fact that crucial elements of support are missing, those of religious education, support for young families, help for meetings to become the welcoming communities they aspire to be, and effective outreach.

NEYM has had the complementary experience, meeting the above needs well, but aware that they need to offer better care and support of their young adult Friends. We

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look forward to learning from each other, and through doing this crucial work, about how Friends can promote growth in the Spirit through all age groups. We expect to learn a great deal about how to foster renewal and revitalization of our monthly meetings, and look forward to sharing those learnings with the wider Religious Society of Friends.