

A Framework for Quaker Youth Programming

Musings of The Youth Program Directors at Powell House 2014

Designing and implementing programs that engage and are useful to participants is a creative, organic process. When done well it is exhausting and exhilarating. It is often a “thin place” where the movement of spirit is especially palpable. To do it well requires returning frequently to the **why, who** and **what**. Why do we have this program? Who is it for? What works and what doesn’t? Intention is important (**why**). Focus is important (**who**). Content and process (**what**) are important in that they support intention and focus.

Below we’ve provided questions for beginning to think about intention and focus. Answers to these questions then create a framework that can be used when developing a youth program or for evaluating and perhaps revamping a current program.

We offer answers to the questions we pose based on our experience of participating in Quaker faith communities and working with young people. Your answers may be different. That’s part of the creative, organic nature of this work.

The Questions

First of all determine what the intent of the programming is:

- Is it to nurture new, hopefully lifelong Quakers, or
- Is it to provide space to spiritually nurture our children, or
- Is it to draw more families to Yearly Meeting sessions or to our monthly meetings

These intentions are not the same but they are not mutually exclusive. Mike and I tend to focus on the middle one and find that the other two happen along the way. But where your focus is determines what the program looks like and who it is for.

With intention clearer, begin to flesh out the specifics:

1. Identify what it is our kids need.
2. Identify what it is we want to give our kids.
3. Identify what our Meeting needs.
4. See how these pieces fit together.

What It Is Our Kids Need

Our experience is that effective and spirit-led youth programming must be youth focused. If their needs are unmet they will look elsewhere. Not every child’s needs are the same or can be met in the same way. Here’s where an awareness of and openness to the movement of spirit is so important. Be present to the child and to the group, not to the program.

Some needs we think are almost universal among youth and adults:

- To be understood
- To belong
- To be treated with honesty and respect
- To be needed
- To have space to just be
- To be allowed to fail

Additionally many of us need:

- Movement
- Physical contact
- Play
- Laughter
- Release

Stress, feelings of inadequacy, fear for the well-being of family, friends and the planet, a sense of isolation are all very much a part of growing up today for many of the kids we work with. Anything we can do to counter these things is good, anything we do to add to them is wrong.

What It Is We Want To Give Our Kids

Working with youth requires getting radical. Going to the root. Talking about, amongst ourselves, why we are us. At the most basic level, what is the purpose of the Religious Society of Friends and why do we wish to be part of it.

The answer for me is that it:

- Provides opportunities to experience unconditional love on an ongoing, sustained basis
- Provides a framework for seeking and recognizing what is true (real)
- Supports me as I try to live lovingly and authentically in the world.

This vision provides me with clear goals of what I want to give to the kids who participate in the youth program:

- A chance to be unconditionally loved and to love unconditionally
- Ways of knowing what is true
- Support as they make choices of how to live in the world.

Mike and I also want the kids to experience mutual respect

...loosely defined as mutual care and regard, dignity, and physical and emotional safety; a state in which everyone counts, and everyone counts upon everyone else. Respect is a quality we can all define for ourselves – and we all know when we are receiving it, and when we aren't

Ralph Cantor, 1977: *Days of Respect*

Respect is in such short supply in contemporary American culture that we want the kids to know what mutual respect feels like and to see what role it plays in fostering a nurturing community.

On an individual level we want to provide the kids with an experience of the abundance, beauty and goodness in life by providing opportunities to:

- Experience new things
- See familiar things in a new way
- Feel wonder
- Exercise their own creative expression
- Experience spaciousness, to feel what it's like to be truly in the moment, open, relaxed, sufficient

These opportunities:

- Allow the youth to identify and use their gifts
- See the sacred in the everyday
- Expand their vocabulary of imagery

This third bullet speaks directly to the concern of how do we give our children words to speak about their spiritual experiences. Immeasurable, untouchable, unable to be bottled or boxed, spiritual things are frequently diminished when labels are applied to them. They are often more easily and faithfully conveyed through metaphors, through imagery. The more, varied things we experience concretely, the richer the images available to us to express our encounters with spirit.

What Our Meetings Need

People. Vibrant meetings need people who come together with a shared sense of who they are and why they are a faith community; people with a shared commitment to one another and the purpose of the community; people who practice loving each other.

In reality, meetings exist because people want to belong, to be part of something important. We can be bonded together by:

- Blood – Born into the Religious Society of Friends, a family connection
- History/Culture – knowledge of where we come from and what practices distinguish us from other groups
- Ideas – Theology, testimonies, shared sense of what it means to be human, why we exist, what we ought to do
- Shared Experiences – what occurs to us when we are together

Mike and I believe that a shared experience of unconditional love is the most durable of these bonds: surviving over distance, time and tragedy. We believe, of all the things we

can give one another, unconditional love is the most important; of all the ways we witness to the world, living in a spirit of unconditional love is most important.

How Do These Pieces Fit Together

So how do we meet the needs of the youth, give them things that we feel are important and respond to the needs of our meetings? We've listed below some things that we have found important.

1. Kids need to know that something is happening at least one to two months before it does. Invitations and reminders from people (adults or peers) that they know are important in getting people (of all ages) to want to attend.
2. Once kids arrive there needs to be structured time very early on and then repeatedly throughout sessions to incorporate "New to the group" or "unknown to the group" youth into existing clusters and to begin to meld various clusters into a cohesive group for the weekend. The "whole group" structured time should be highly participatory - games, name circles, spectrum exercises, creative opportunities - so that individuals within the group get to know one another better and form connections on all different levels. At some point early on, time should be spent developing a shared understanding of the intention of the gathered group and what's expected of its members.
3. There should be monitored unstructured time to explore the group on one's own terms. The purpose of monitoring is to ensure that the individuals and group are safe and to identify group dynamics that may need to be explored when the group returns to a structured time together.
4. There should be opportunities to fully participate in Session or Meeting activities if individual youth or the whole group wants to. Committees should invite participation by clearly and concisely laying out in written form what they hope to work on when they gather. Multigenerational worship, worship sharing and community building sessions would benefit us as a whole faith community.
5. There should be openness to and opportunities to do youth community business if it arises. We should also give our kids permission to look beyond the youth community. I'd love to hear their responses to "I wish we as a faith community would..." or "If we had 2,000 New York Yearly Meeting Quakers at our disposal, we would have them..."

The suggestions above have been developed with inter-meeting gatherings (Yearly Meeting sessions, Regional Meeting programs) in mind. They also apply to groups that meet more frequently with a core group of regular participants (such as First Day School or the Powell House Youth Program). For such groups we strongly encourage seeking and using youth input in developing program specifics and perhaps even in setting intention and identifying needs.

What Do You Need Personally To Do Youth Programming

- Unconditional love for your charges. By this we mean their well-being is important to you. You have a strong desire to help them grow into their best selves and to help them find what brings them fully alive. You find them funny, touching, interesting, amazing, capable. You see them with “God’s” eyes – the authentic person they are, not the behaviors they are exhibiting.

Other things that help:

- Sensitivity to the needs of individuals and the group.
- Ability to listen: to what is said, for what is meant, for what is unsaid
- Openness to the movement of spirit
- Respect for the participants and the process
- Willingness to let the youth lead when appropriate
- Flexibility
- Willingness to share what you know with a light touch
- Willingness to get things wrong
- Ability to take responsibility for failure, apologize and move on
- Willingness to not have the answers, to enjoy the adventure of a shared exploration of the unknown, curiosity
- Playful spirit, sense of humor

So how is this Quaker youth programming?

“Let’s see what love can do.” William Penn

If we need a statement of belief to define ourselves to the world as Quakers, this is the one we want to use. If we want to be radical Quakers and go back to our roots, let’s start here.

Love

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) traces its name back to John 15:14 “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” And what are we commanded to do? John 15:17 “My command is to love one another.” And what kind of love is it? The kind that strips away the walls we erect around us and calls forth the best that is within us. John 15: 2 “Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” It is transformative. It is unconditional.

Love is always patient and kind; Love is never jealous; love is not boastful or conceited, it is never rude and never seeks its own advantage, it does not take offence or store up grievances. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but finds its joy in the truth. It is always ready to make allowances, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes. Love never comes to an end...

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

And the fruit that we are being asked to bear?

On the other hand the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control; no law can touch such things as these.

Galatians 5:22-23

So our faith tradition asks us to love one another into being decent people.

*Friends,
Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusation against one another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand, if there has been any slip or fall...Oh! Wait to feel this spirit, and to be guided to walk in this spirit, that ye may enjoy the Lord in sweetness, and walk sweetly, meekly, tenderly, peaceably, and lovingly with one another.*

Isaac Pennington, 1667

We believe “this spirit” that Pennington speaks about is unconditional love. Youth programs full of this spirit allow our youth to experience first-hand what early Friends experienced. They provide our youth with practice doing the very thing we are called to do as a Religious Society of Friends: to love one another into being.

Truth

Everyone is to be in it (the truth), and to walk in the truth, in the spirit, and to come to the truth in their own particulars...

George Fox, 1668: Epistle 260

Take heed of knowledge, for it puffeth up, but dwell in the truth, and be what ye speak.

George Fox. 1654: Epistle 58

The suspicion... is that for Fox 'truth' does not mean...a representation of reality, whether in words or images, but reality itself...So truth then was a richer, broader concept than it is now...with this broad understanding of the word, truth was not to be 'believed', any more than reality is to be believed. It was to be faced and accepted, and 'lived in', made the basis of one's life. Truth was the reality of one's life, which is always there to be experienced if only one is open to it.

Rex Ambler, 2001: Truth of the Heart

Rex Ambler offers an intriguing theory of what Fox was offering to others, one that resonates with my own experience of living faithfully. It speaks to living authentic lives, to living with integrity. The Light then becomes a means of knowing what is real in our lives, in others, in the world around us and responding as love would have us to that knowledge. Waiting in the light in the manner of Friends is an individual and corporate practice of seeking what is real. When we do it right, Friends share what they have come to see in the Light where it is then tested within the gathered body

This practice is actually well suited for children and teens. They are trying to determine what's real and what's not, as they are developing and maturing. Many of them have finely tuned nonsense meters. They sense when people or situations are not genuine. Programming that encourages youth to share what they know to be true from their own experience and to listen to others do the same models the core practice of our faith.

Witness

...be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your life and conduct may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one...

George Fox, 1656

Youth programming that provides opportunities to experience unconditional love and authentic relationships with one another and the world leads to young people who are patterns and examples out in the world.

Practice

Quaker worship isn't about silence so much as it is about being present in Light and Love and connecting to one another at a spiritual level. Programming that allows participants to be themselves and open to others creates a space for youth to be immersed in such worship. Laughter, play, conversation, touch, home-cooked food, physical work, time outside, music all present opportunities for participants to open to themselves and to others.

At times we do settle down and become still so that we may more easily become aware of the movement of the spirit among us. Often that ensuing silence is joy-filled, grounding, and satisfies us in a deeply fulfilling way. Rarely it quakes and quivers. We feel pulled, antsy and restless to do something: good, hard, scary even, but something to make Love more felt in the world.

Quaker discipline isn't about do's and don'ts so much as it is about developing the self-control to practice the core of our faith: to live in Love and Truth and Witness with our lives.

These are some key areas that we focus on in our youth program and that we have identified as being fundamental to Friends' form of worship and business processes:

- Show up and be present. This requires commitment, focus and an ability to let go of the distractions of daily routine
- Listen so that others can speak their truth
- Speak your truth so that others can hear it
- Honor the unique gifts of the individual
- Care deeply about the health (wholeness) of the "body", the community

Quaker Ministry is not so much about preaching the truth as it is about making Love and truth manifest in the world. Gifts are how we do that. Leadings are the specific ways we are to use our gifts. Ministry is everyone's work. Gifts are diverse and present in each of us.

Youth programming that enables participants to affirm each other's strengths and find ways to incorporate those strengths into the dynamic of the group prepares our youth to nurture and engage in ministry.

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

Howard Thurman