

# LEYM Visioning Committee - Summary Report

## Background: Origins, Charge, and Work of the Visioning Committee

One of the outcomes of 2019's business sessions was a new ad-hoc "LEYM Visioning Committee" tasked with exploring ways that the Yearly Meeting (YM) could be more effective in its functioning and outreach. Six people met virtually between August and January to explore this question (8 times as a whole group, with some individual and smaller group work in between). While the group had no decision-making power, it represented an opportunity to surface important themes and questions and help focus fruitful areas of action and/or further investigation. We saw our charge as "Bring recommendations to the YM on practices and structures that foster a more vibrant, flexible, engaged, and Spirit-filled organization".

After defining the task, we expanded our perspectives. We interviewed 19 people from both within and outside of LEYM with relevant insights from their own experience - either they had leadership in other yearly meetings or represented different generations and levels of current engagement within LEYM. Questions focused both on the institution and on personal experience, including:

- What in your yearly meeting stands out as being energizing, life-giving, or Spirit-filled?
- What are you doing in your yearly meeting that you would consider a "best practice" worth sharing -whether it is an innovation or has been around for a long time?
- What, in your opinion, are the most important functions of a yearly meeting?
- If your monthly meeting is your spiritual home, what is the yearly meeting beyond that?

After reviewing our notes with hopefully the right balance of worship and intellect, we discerned three categories that felt useful in organizing thoughts, although we recognize that they have permeable boundaries. One was the YM's own structures and practices (such as the way we organize into committees or develop agendas). A second focused on the Monthly Meeting (MM) level - including how the YM communicates with or fosters connections between MM's, how its programs support MMs, etc. The third category could be understood as holding questions of how the YM serves individuals, including how the YM identifies and supports individual ministries or builds intergenerational connections.

In this process, we repeatedly returned to the idea of dancing between polarities. We understand that the YM's paths forward will be a continual balancing between two sometimes-conflicting values, and it is wiser to discern the best balance for today's YM than imagine we can find a more permanent "right answer". That said, identifying those polarities will help us balance them more nimbly.

# Plan of the Report

Although our discussions were wide-ranging and often very free-form, we began to feel that the ideas, concerns, and concrete suggestions we were surfacing could be organized into the three categories described above: those that pertain to the life of a yearly meeting, those that pertain to the life of a monthly meeting, and those that pertain to the life of an individual Friend.

Accordingly, we've organized this report into three main sections that correspond to these aspects of our experience of our YM. Within each section, we've identified major themes and any polarities that seem to define the spiritual space, supporting and illustrating them with quotes from Friends we interviewed when possible. We've also proposed a set of queries for each section, in hopes these may guide further reflection, and we've made a few concrete recommendations. Please note, however, that we haven't felt led to propose root-and-branch reform of the YM, so our recommendations are, like the queries, suggestions for further consideration.

## Findings

### Institutional Level: The Life of the Yearly Meeting

**Polarities:** Interviewees named polarities primarily related to how the YM spends time together.

- Tension between valuing Quaker process and the rationale behind it, and calls for streamlining business sessions.

*"For 100 people to sit twice a day for approximately 2 hours per session where one person after another presents and 4- 5 people spend an inordinate amount of time "word-smithing" only to have the whole dialog re-read does not fit the youth paradigm of spiritual refuge and fellowship."*

- A related tension between social time and building relationships and conducting meaningful business together

*(when asked "What stands out in your YM as being energizing, life-giving, or Spirit-filled?)" "Having as much fun as possible."*

*"The residence model [e.g. staying on a campus together] is a victim of its own success. It leads both the YM's and FGC to try to ratchet up the interest and entertainment and de-emphasize the work, to make themselves more attractive and compete for Friends' limited discretionary time and dollars."*

### Themes

- Unique Value of a YM: As the process began, the Visioning committee was considering how much the YM primarily exists as a service organization for MMs and how much it is a valuable institution in its own right. Interviewee comments illustrated that having a vibrant larger structure is itself a value to MMs.

*“There’s a limit to what one MM can do in working towards this world. The spiritual connection I feel to my MM is tied to the bigger interest in changing the world. Feeding those projects is integral to the spiritual life of our meeting and Quakers more broadly. The role that I see a YM playing in the spiritual health of these meetings is to help further our experiences of ongoing revelation.”*

*“[The speaker’s YM has] a clear priority process related to our budget. Everyone is involved in saying what is important for me. We have five main priorities. Spiritual development and religious education; outreach, welcome, inclusion and witness; relationship and communication; leadership and administration; stewardship, integrity and accountability. The key is that the yearly meeting exists to support the spiritual health of the monthly meetings. Everyone supports the yearly meeting because they can connect with one of these priorities.”*

*“My favorite [unique value of our YM] is our connection to the other branches of Friends, particularly in this region.”*

One of the sources of value, for many interviewees, came from a collectively held set of understandings and values at the YM level.

*“The YM can work on more abstract conversations about what we do agree on...that we can use as a metric to understand how decisions are consistent with our views.”*

*“[Our YM] has just completed work on their own faith and practice, after something like 12 years of work. The work was done by a committee and brought to the annual meeting section by section for approval, a section a year. This gave the whole YM a sense of ownership in the document and forced them to consider their understanding of practice deeply.”*

- Value in having someone designated to own YM functions: Interviewees from YM’s with paid staff spoke to the benefits paid staff provided.

*“[Our YM] has a position called field secretary, a Friend who ministers directly to the needs of individual Friends and MMs within the YM... the approach taken varies with the individual holding the position, but it generally involves a lot of visitation and interaction with the MMs...this is a really significant link between the YM and the MMs.”*

*“A unifying force was our Youth and Young Adult Coordinator and Sec. for Earthcare. They did monthly meeting visitation. An administrative secretary is also very helpful. They’re all modestly paid but they maintain the link among Friends.”*

- YM Agenda Building: A number of YM’s are successfully experimenting on different methods to create engagement with their annual agenda.

*“I’ve created a forum without an agenda, although business might arise and be dealt with at MfB. This allows people to start networking and bring forward where Spirit is moving within their own communities. This has started cooperative efforts between meetings.”*

*“At this year’s annual sessions we threw out the agenda. Instead of doing all the normal stuff, we focused on right relationships in light of racism and in particular with indigenous people. We didn’t make any decisions regarding budget, nominations, etc...The content of what has life is made possible by the structure we have.”*

- The importance of playfulness

*“We have a light hearted way about us. It shows up in our committee work, our business meetings, and especially in our “creativity nights.” We mingle young and old and middles a lot, that helps with the humor.”*

### **Queries**

- What are our tolerances for and resistances to change? Where do they get triggered?
- What assumptions could we challenge around the time we have together as we consider correct proportions of relationship-building and business?
- We’re a comparatively small YM facing most of the same issues and concerns as any of the larger YMs. How can we find the best ways to leverage our modest resources to address these issues?
- Would LEYM be well served by working on shared statements of belief? What is the right form for this work? Would the work of developing a Faith & Practice be compensated by the richness of the experience?
- There is a sense that LEYM has its own identity among the North American YMs. What is it? How does it help us understand where we fit in the wider world of Quakers?
- How does our YM committee structure support and/or impede our faithfulness? Is it rightly ordered for Nominating Committee to hold this concern, or should it be the work of the whole YM?
- How do we balance respect for Quaker process with a desire for less burdensome business sessions? How do we ensure that meetings for worship with attention to business be as spiritually rewarding as any other meetings for worship?
- What is the proper role for online technologies such as Zoom in the work of our committees and the life of the YM generally?
- How can we better integrate adult & children’s programming during our annual meeting?
- What is the importance of the physical location of our YM sessions, and does it need to change/rotate?

### **Recommendations**

- Submit the question of developing a shared statement of belief, including the possibility of an LEYM Faith & Practice, to deep discernment.
- Consider revisions to the committee structure and/or modes of service within the YM.
- Take steps to ensure a wider and deeper understanding of Quaker process throughout the YM.
- Consider creating a staff position with daily, year-around concern for the life of the YM, such as a general secretary or field secretary.

# Local Faith Community Level: The Life of the Monthly Meeting

## Polarities

- YM's role in providing support for MMs and providing constructive challenge for them - an extension of the endemic tension in Friends between the Truth of a smaller unit and the Truth of a larger unit
- Balancing Spirituality [Faith] and Activism [Practice] in the YM's programming and support

## Themes

- LEYM as a balance: The YM's size can buffer any dynamic of a MM.

Like MMs, YMs have discovered the blessings and difficulties that come with online programming - another area to balance, and potentially also a source of balance.

*"The YM is doing online workshops on Zoom, a MFW every Sunday on Zoom and worship sharing sessions. This innovation has come from Covid but we're likely to keep doing it. We've seen a lot of Friends we haven't seen in years. How do we maintain newfound connectedness that we've found through this digital transformation?"*

- YM as a resource that MMs can draw from

*"It wouldn't have to be a YM, some people get this from FGC rather than their YM, but things as simple as - resources for children's meeting, or resources that might be handy...if you could use an outside facilitator for conflict, maybe someone in your YM can help you out."*

One interviewee noted that these functions, resources, and the sense of connection can be particularly useful for smaller meetings.

- Desirability of continuity and back-and-forth between MMs and YM

*"Our YM clerk sends out a letter to all monthly meetings before our annual sessions to help them prepare. Another practice that helps us is that minutes are not brought from monthly meetings to the yearly meeting if they have not been seasoned throughout the yearly meeting. "*

*"The reason Quaker process works is because of all the other things that aren't Quaker process... my ideal for LEYM is 1) a time where we get to know each other's priorities, how we think, to build relationships, but in the service of 2) when we want to collaborate on a wider scale we know who to reach out to, what skill sets people have. The more we can know about the resources we have within the YM the better we can collaborate"*

- Centrality of relationship and community in the YM/MM relationship

*“If you want to lobby go to FCNL, network at FGC, [but] if you want to find better ways to care about individuals and work together with them...do that at your YM or your quarter.”*

*“We are not challenged in finding financial support. We moved to an “abundant financing” or “pay as led” model for funding the YM and the annual gathering, and we have been solidly in the black. We really do operate on the belief that it isn’t a party unless everyone can come.”*

Committee members noted that there were multiple meaningful metaphors for our experience of YM, including an extended family (in line with the centrality of relationship) - with all nuclear units belonging to the whole naturally and little division between the idea of “family” in one form or another - and also a city/county division, with the county able to provide resources and different functions based on scale. These two metaphors each inform and color our understanding of YM functions and relationships.

### **Queries**

- What does the YM offer that is meaningful to monthly meetings?
- How do we know if we’re balancing effectively? What tells us we’re discerning that balance correctly?
- What is the benefit of combining these elements, and where can they effectively stand alone?
- How can YM sessions be a balance between needed business sessions and a place where common concerns can be shared in a more informal way?
- How can we support a balance between the Faith and Practice within MMs and a shared sense of values in the YM?

### **Recommendations**

- An increased emphasis on unearthing, supporting and saying yes to MM energy
  - Facilitating a “petri dish” atmosphere where like-minded people in different MMs can make connections and cooperation for their ideas
  - In business sessions, creating additional pathways for MM initiatives to be shared around, seasoned, and then get on the YM agenda
- ...While at the same time building muscles for that energy to be robust
  - Providing intellectual, activist, spiritual offerings that can balance MM proclivities and remind people of the richness of this faith
  - Finding ways to connect MMs to each other in places where it matters - information that feels directly relevant to their situation as opposed to generalized news

## **Personal Level: The Life of the Individual Friend**

### **Polarity**

- The value of individuals anchoring in a MM community, and the value of the YM providing a spiritual home for those who are not anchored in a MM

*"I found a spiritual home in my MM, but it was never enough, because it limited me to one branch of Friends when I also wanted what was available in the others...My spiritual home is less focused on one location for this reason. I love and am nurtured by all the levels of structure..."*

*"I'm on very many yearly meeting lists. I find it pretty fascinating how different they are...some of them have a big emphasis on social justice and witness and changing the world, and others do a lot more of sharing of explicitly spiritual writings or workshops or opportunities. I think there's a fair bit of variation to and how good a fit individuals are for their MM....If your MM is a social activism meeting and doesn't have as much spiritual programming, or vice versa, [you may seek YM community]. One meeting is unlikely to be strong in everything."*

*"If the yearly meeting finds that the yearly meeting is the spiritual home for some of its members, it is up to the leadership of the yearly meeting to direct these people to resources they need to find a spiritual home in a monthly meeting. Efforts should be made to strengthen their monthly meetings."*

## **Themes**

- YM's potential as a place to name and develop leaders and ministries (individual, group, Meeting) - and as an aggregator of gifts

*"Yearly meetings are places inhabited by people who take more time to be grounded in their faith than many monthly meeting attenders do. The YM provides a place for these folks to get together."*

*"The experience of hosting the FGC Gathering was beneficial...they came to know each other better, they came to know the gifts they have, and they learned of the leadership skills among them.."*

*"Traditionally in the quietist period of Quakerism, a younger minister started in the ministry at home. Now most mature ministers are having an impact at home and less mature ministers are going to the yearly meeting level because that is where you can get more nurturing. In my own experience, yearly meetings and other gatherings were the bodies that gave me the fire"*

- YM as a place of individual connections

*"When [35 yr old who grew up active in YM] thinks about her experience with LEYM, she does not think about the kids her age as much as she does adults who were significant to her. She listed a half a dozen adults that came to her mind. She highlighted the times the kids presented skits for the whole yearly meeting or held intergenerational activities. Kids need to have time to be among themselves, but the long term significance is in the relationships they build with people of all ages."*

Interviewees were asked if they had any insights particularly around intergenerational connections. While several pointed out areas of cultural difference, others noted that putting individuals in categories often makes us lose sight of their individuality.

*"We're at a generational transition point. A lot of the older Friends came in through the civil rights movement / VietNam protests and that's how they frame activism. That's very different from younger people who don't have that context...Older Friends are concerned about Friends continuing on but they encourage younger people to do it the way they've always done it."*

*“The basic core of the testimonies and the experience of the inner life cuts across generations. But the way that different demographics experience them is different...we are finding that if people are working different kinds of jobs or have student loans, ministry can be difficult. It can be hard to have time to participate. We offer childcare at all of our gatherings. We are asking ourselves if there should be payments to people who do significant work, similar to how a released Friend might be funded..”*

*“Generational questions come out of a misconceived notion that the generations differ greatly in their spiritual needs. In fact, the difference is in their levels of experience. We need to give youth more opportunities to lead and be given accountability. Give them room to do crazy things. Listen to their crazy ideas. We need to create a balance between wisdom of experience and new ideas. We need to treat young adults as people who are interested in the life of the yearly meeting and Quakerism at large.”*

### **Queries**

- What gifts (verbal and nonverbal) do we recognize as a yearly meeting?
- How can we develop gifts of individuals?
- What religious and spiritual education or other programming might support the spiritual development of LEYM’s individual members?
- How do we make participation in YM structures (including committees) accessible to youth and those who work with youth?
- Do we emphasize generational differences at the expense of building a community where connections between generations are natural and expected?

### **Recommendations**

- LEYM to create an educational experience outside of annual sessions that could provide time for corporate worship as well as ongoing spiritual development
- Consider creating a staff position with a year-around concern for First Day School and youth and children’s programming.

## **Summary**

While every YM has its unique context, there is much to be learned in the challenges and successes of our sister organizations. LEYM has solid finances, significant involvement in many Quaker umbrella organizations, and executes our annual meeting in good order. Nevertheless, interviews pointed to new forms that can be imagined, discerned, and created, and new balances that might provide fresh avenues for Spirit to flow through our structures, our meetings, and all those affiliated with us. The Visioning Committee has sat with the question, who are we, or who might we be, when we’re at our best? This is the spirit in which the Visioning Committee was formed and has done its work.

The observations, queries, and recommendations offered here represent our attempt to make our exploratory discernment accessible to the yearly meeting. We hope presenting it in this form, rather than as a fully-structured plan for reforming YM governance, will allow the entire LEYM community to build on what we’ve started.



Submitted by

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**Thanks to All Interviewees (listed in alphabetical order with affiliation)**

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Bill Carlie - Southeastern YM

Blair Ellis - LEYM

Heather Gosse - FWCC

Rausie Hobson - Rocky River Friends Church Friends Church of North Carolina YM

John Hunter - North Carolina-Conservative YM / Piedmont Friends Fellowship

Bruce Kanarek - Illinois YM

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