
New Gatherings of Friends

North Pacific Yearly Meeting seeks to foster occasions for worship after the manner of Friends, and in particular to encourage the development of new gatherings, including informal or home meetings, worship groups, preparative meetings, and monthly meetings.

Informal Meetings—Sowing the Seeds

Wherever seekers gather, there may be a spark for a new meeting. To this end, the yearly meeting encourages the formation of discussion groups, book groups, non-violent social action groups, meditation groups, and other informal gatherings, as places where the desire to worship may form. The yearly meeting also encourages home meetings—regularly-scheduled meetings for worship that take place in the homes of those who already belong to a monthly meeting, often when the meetinghouse is distant from a group of worshippers. Informal groups arise most commonly when the monthly meeting encompasses a broad geographic area or is very large.

These gatherings may result in questions about how to start a worship group, and in the seeking of answers from Quaker websites, literature, and meetings. Members of monthly meetings may visit or belong to such groups and thus be ready sources of information about Quaker worship.

Worship Groups

A worship group is a gathering of people that meets regularly for worship after the manner of Friends and is led to unite with Quaker principles and practices. A worship group may organize independently, but usually comes under the care of a monthly meeting. The group may first need to contact and get information, advice, or other support from established Friends groups, including NPYM's Outreach & Visitation Committee. North Pacific Yearly Meeting has helpful information on how to form a worship group (see Bibliography); regional or quarterly meetings may also be good sources of information. The group is encouraged to ask one or two members of the Ministry & Oversight Committee of the quarterly meeting, or of a monthly meeting, to visit and help them with the discernment process.

Monthly meetings are encouraged to be alert to groups of remote individuals who are seeking to worship as Quakers and provide assistance according to the needs of the groups. If requested, a monthly meeting may establish a committee to help seekers develop a structure and practice for worship. The monthly meeting may provide helpful books and pamphlets, speakers, and the presence of Friends at the group's worship. The monthly meeting actively discerns the level of ongoing support it can provide.

When a worship group comes under its care, the monthly meeting informs the quarterly and yearly meetings and designates a committee or other form of support for it. The committee usually includes a member of the monthly meeting's Pastoral Care Committee. The committee is available to give help and guidance to the worship group. The committee meets with the worship group as often as necessary to discern what the group's spiritual and practical needs are and how the monthly meeting can best help the group. In situations where the worship group is geographically remote, the committee and the worship group work to find creative ways of increasing connection and community—for example, by finding mutually agreed-upon meeting places, offering weekend gatherings, establishing travel

funding, or seeking visitation and support from the yearly and quarterly meeting or other Quaker organizations.

A worship group may be led to change from one sponsoring monthly meeting to another. A monthly meeting may be unable to continue supporting a worship group. In consultation with the quarterly meeting, another monthly meeting may be found to assume support of the worship group.

A worship group usually names a person to serve as the convener and correspondent of the group. Monthly and regional meetings and other Friends groups or organizations address their communications to this correspondent, who is responsible for sharing these with the entire group. When the worship group chooses a new correspondent, that new person informs these other Quaker organizations.

There is no single path of development for worship groups. Worship groups may decide that meeting for worship is their only activity, and it is acceptable to continue in this fashion for an indefinite time. If there is a sponsoring monthly meeting, it does not encourage the worship group to develop committees and other meeting structures until the group is ready to do so. It may be sufficient initially to simply establish an official relationship with the Religious Society of Friends and provide an avenue for membership, which comes only through a monthly meeting. However, some worship groups are large and well-structured from the beginning and can undertake activities such as shared meals; reading, study, and discussion groups; service projects; religious education; public witness; or worship-sharing groups.

A worship group need organize only to the degree that is right for it at the current time. It is important to attend to whatever level of organization is needed to nurture the interests and concerns of its participants, including children. It also provides ways to connect with other Friends groups which can enrich the life of the worship group.

A worship group is limited in particular ways: it may not receive members, take marriages or committed relationships under its care, or otherwise act formally as an established meeting. Such actions must be carried out through the sponsoring monthly meeting. The sponsoring monthly meeting is responsible for the yearly and quarterly meeting assessments for its members participating in a worship group. (See “Yearly Meeting Finances” in Chapter 8.)

It is important that those who start a worship group be dedicated to the leadings of the Light and that the group be devoted to the growth of the Spirit among them. This goal will help the group through discouragements and setbacks, which are bound to occur. Groups suffer through periods when they are weakened by departures of participants or in other ways—when their very existence seems threatened and when it is hard to remember that a meeting’s life is grounded in the Spirit. There may be times when only one or two meet for worship at the appointed hour. It is worthwhile to persevere at these times, not only for those few in attendance but for those unable to attend, that they may be upheld in the Light and that all may come to know the comfort of an ongoing meeting. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20).

When a worship group feels it is ready to organize and conduct business in the manner of an established meeting, it may, but is not required to, ask its sponsoring monthly meeting to recognize it as a preparative meeting. Occasionally a worship group develops in its organization to the point where it is acting as a preparative meeting even though it has never asked to be so recognized. In such a situation it may be appropriate to apply for monthly meeting status without first being recognized as a preparative meeting.

Occasionally a worship group does not change or grow over time and the group determines that it will remain a worship group. In this case it may be helpful for the worship group and the sponsoring monthly meeting to discuss their continuing relationship, taking care that neither group is overtaxed.

Occasionally a worship group loses its attenders or agrees that it is no longer a functioning group. The worship group's correspondent should notify its sponsoring meeting of the group's desire to lay itself down and work with the meeting to make sure the process unfolds in good order.

Preparative Meetings

A preparative meeting is a meeting for worship and for business that is under the care of, and reports regularly to, a sponsoring monthly meeting, and that ordinarily looks forward to becoming a monthly meeting. If a worship group is ready to be recognized as a preparative meeting, it asks its sponsoring monthly meeting for this recognition. As a preparative meeting, it continues to receive care and counsel from its sponsoring monthly meeting. A preparative meeting may be led to change from one sponsoring monthly meeting to another, if the circumstances require.

After the manner of a monthly meeting, a preparative meeting has officers and committees as needed, holds a meeting for business once a month, and may receive and distribute funds on its own behalf. It regularly sends a copy of the minutes of its meeting for business to the sponsoring monthly meeting's standing committee. A preparative meeting may not receive members, take marriages or committed relationships under its care, or otherwise act formally as an established meeting; such actions are brought to and carried out through its sponsoring monthly meeting. Friends participating in a preparative meeting customarily hold their membership in the sponsoring monthly meeting, which covers assessments to the yearly and quarterly meetings until the preparative meeting is ready to assume that responsibility. (See "Yearly Meeting Finances" in Chapter 8.)

Preparative meetings ordinarily look forward to growth and development that may enable them to become monthly meetings—though this process depends upon many factors and the timeline varies widely. Some preparative meetings remain so for a prolonged time. It is important for a long-term preparative meeting and its sponsoring monthly meeting to discern whether the group will remain a preparative meeting or revert to a worship group. When the preparative meeting discerns whether it will continue or lay itself down, it works with its sponsoring monthly meeting to determine what level of continued support is needed. If the decision is to lay itself down, this may involve the winding down of the group's finances and the notification of other Quaker groups about its dissolution.

Recognition of New Gatherings by Quarterly Meetings

The worship group or preparative meeting is usually sponsored by a monthly meeting. Occasionally it is more practical or reasonable for the worship group or preparative meeting to apply directly to the appropriate quarterly meeting for recognition. Either the quarterly meeting's Ministry & Oversight or Ministry & Counsel Committee acts as a support committee for the developing group, or it appoints a separate support committee. Recognition directly through quarterly meetings is logistically difficult and is used only when there is no alternative. In Montana, several worship groups come under the care of the Montana Gathering of Friends functioning as a monthly meeting.

Establishment of Monthly Meetings

In order to become an independent monthly meeting, a preparative meeting (or, in some cases, a worship group) usually consults first with the standing committee appointed by the sponsoring monthly meeting. If the way opens, the preparative meeting sends a letter to the clerk of the sponsoring monthly meeting asking that its request be forwarded to the quarterly meeting. The letter describes why the preparative meeting seeks to become a monthly meeting and how the group's attenders know that their group is ready to do so. If the monthly meeting concurs, it forwards this request to the Ministry & Oversight or Ministry & Counsel Committee of the quarterly meeting. If the latter committee feels it right and timely, it recommends recognition of the new monthly meeting to the quarterly meeting and asks for the appointment of a Visiting Committee.

Different quarterly meetings may vary somewhat in their processes for recognizing monthly meetings. The quarterly meeting's Visiting Committee usually consists of four or five Friends, including one or two members of the monthly meeting standing committee, and one or two others who have not been associated with the preparative meeting. The Visiting Committee meets with the prospective monthly meeting, making sure its members are aware of the responsibilities of a monthly meeting and giving all possible guidance. Great tenderness, care, and deliberation at this stage may prevent a preparative meeting from becoming a monthly meeting without adequate structure in place that will allow it to succeed independently. The Visiting Committee attends meetings for worship and meetings for business and visits with members and attenders of the preparative meeting. During this time, if not beforehand, the preparative meeting addresses the following:

1. *Spiritual condition.* Does the preparative meeting function under divine guidance? Is the meeting for worship the center of the life of the meeting? What is the vitality of the meetings for worship? Are they held in the spirit of expectant waiting and communion with God? How does the preparative meeting nurture the spiritual growth of its members?
2. *History and experience.* How long has the group been meeting? What relations does it have with other local and regional meetings, and with other Quaker organizations? What geographical area does it serve? Where and when is its meeting for worship? What is the usual attendance? How many Friends, other attenders, and children are there in the meeting? Of those taking responsibility for the meeting, how many appear well settled in the area? What are the meeting's social concerns?
3. *Evidence of good order.* Has the preparative meeting studied *Faith and Practice* of North Pacific Yearly Meeting, especially the chapter "The Monthly Meeting"? Does it hold a meeting for business once a month? How are minutes taken and approved? How are the functions of clerk and other officers understood? What committees does it have? How are the functions of the committees on ministry and worship and pastoral care being carried out? How are financial responsibilities being handled? How does the meeting handle the selection of officers and committees and of a Nominating Committee? How are children cared for by the meeting? How does the meeting provide religious education for children and adults?
4. *Other information.* Other questions or issues may arise which either the Visiting Committee or the preparative meeting need to address.

If the Visiting Committee agrees that the preparative meeting is ready to become a monthly meeting, it prepares a written report. The report refers to the preparative meeting's responses to the questions above. The Visiting Committee presents this report at the next business meeting of the quarterly meeting, with a recommendation for action. The quarterly meeting is the body that recognizes new monthly meetings.

The clerk of the quarterly meeting sends a minute of recognition about the new monthly meeting to the yearly meeting Coordinating Committee and presiding clerk. The presiding clerk announces the creation of the new monthly meeting at the next Annual Session of North Pacific Yearly Meeting. The new monthly meeting functions as a monthly meeting as soon as its status is recognized by the quarterly meeting, although its transition away from the sponsoring monthly meeting may take place gradually over the year following recognition.

After the quarterly meeting recognizes the new monthly meeting, the Visiting Committee continues to assist both it and the sponsoring monthly meeting with the process of separation and transition. The transition process may involve transfers of membership and property, and may also require changes in financial responsibilities. When the transition is complete, usually within a year of the quarterly meeting's recognition, the sponsoring monthly meeting's standing committee is laid down. During this year, members of the Visiting Committee may attend the new monthly meeting's

meetings for worship and business and give whatever support is requested.

If the Visiting Committee or the quarterly meeting is not led to recognize the preparative meeting as a monthly meeting, it proceeds tenderly to explain the hesitations. The quarterly meeting may establish a committee to help the requesting group address any obstacles to its application.