

The Need

Northern Yearly Meeting is frequently asked to join like-minded organizations and individuals in making statements of concern, belief and need for action. Most of these requests call for timely signing on or publicly supporting a letter or petition, but they pass us by because we have essentially no way to take timely action. The requests mostly concern issues already engaged in by our member meetings and worship groups, and by our NYM committees.

We – the monthly meetings, worship groups and committees of NYM – take actions and make statements to improve the lives of other people, beings and the planet. These statements are born in corporate discernment and derived from and supported by our faith and practice, our NYM Faith and Practice, and previous minutes.

Our YM as a whole does not readily have mechanisms to do this sort of thing. Requests to make statements and join with others' come to the YM clerk; most come from outside of NYM, but they also can come from within NYM. Recently the pace and number of requests have increased. Within a recent 1-month period the clerk fielded six such requests! Many of these requests are time sensitive and it is not unusual for them to relate to concerns and issues in the news.

Current Practice

The clerk fields the request and discerns whether the stated concern is related to the current work of NYM committees. If so, the concern is offered to a committee to thresh, and perhaps for them to bring to the next annual or interim session.

If the concern has not been taken up by NYM the clerk can: discern it does not rise to a NYM need to respond, and thus can share it in announcements to MM/WG/individuals; bring it to the next annual or interim session; or call a separate meeting of the whole for discernment on whether it is a concern for NYM. The obvious problem with all of these processes is that they do not allow NYM to join with statements of timely concern. And thus many concerns NYM Friends would likely easily join with pass us by.

Examples of recent concerns that NYM could have supported include signing a letter regarding removing barriers to voting, signing a letter and supporting training to support and grow black liberation, signing a letter regarding the complete omission of American Indians in reinvigorating America's democracy, and signing a letter in opposition to the repression of people's ability to receive asylum. Because of our lack of visible engagement, Friends are perceived as being uninvolved and uninterested in current concerns.

The Proposal

A Nimble Responders committee would be assigned to consider signing on to letters for NYM and writing minutes for NYM when speedy timing is at issue. This committee would discern whether the specific timely request is consistent with how the yearly meeting as a whole thinks and feels. Because NYM is already engaged in so many of the concerns in these requests, the discernment and responding will likely not be difficult or strenuous. For discernment this committee would seek guidance from previous minutes and decisions by the YM and from NYM Faith & Practice. They would write responses or sign statements, then publicize these statements within the yearly meeting through our usual communication vehicles. They would also bring them forward to annual and interim sessions for review.

At these sessions, the yearly meeting body could provide feedback which would guide this committee in future action.

The clerk would continue to use current practice for those concerns *not* requiring speedy action. In addition, any concern resulting in difficult discernment would not be acted on by this committee. Requests on issues or concerns perceived by this committee as new would not generate statements and the committee would bring these issues to annual or interim sessions for the usual consideration of support, or further discernment.

The Nimble Responders committee would have the following membership: NYM clerk and assistant clerk, the clerk or designee of Ministry and Nurture Committee (M&N), the clerk or designee of Advancement and Outreach Committee (A&O), a recent past NYM clerk, and two members at large based on the needs and gifts the clerk/clerks in consultation with the committee thought would complement and enhance the depth, diversity and skills present in the committee. The commitment to this committee work would be three years, with members on staggered terms.

A trial period for the practice would be between Spring 2021 Interim Session and Annual Session 2021, with Nimble Responders committee reporting to Annual Session on the outcomes of this period of use.