

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Young Adult Friends Minute of Concern on Proposed Staff Cuts

We, the Young Adult Friends (YAF) of PYM, minute our grave concern that the recently-announced changes to Yearly Meeting staff are out of alignment with our Quaker values and witness in the world, and with PYM's own vision. We honor the faithful service of our staff leadership, and hope that this decision came from a place of desire to improve the Yearly Meeting. However, as a ministry of inclusion in the Yearly Meeting, we feel called to ask the General Secretary to consider and redress the ways in which the changes do not honor the full experience and differing needs of some of its members.

We stand with Green Street Meeting¹ and other Friends in calling the Yearly Meeting to examine whether unconscious racial bias influenced the decision to cut or demote the jobs of staff who were challenging the organization to live up to its commitment to become anti-racist. We take seriously the testimony of Marille Thomas regarding the racism she experienced and continues to experience at PYM.²

We stand with Youth Programs in calling the Yearly Meeting to pause the restructuring of their staffing pending further input and threshing.

We are also concerned for the YAF community in particular, as the changes to the YAF Coordinator position deeply affect our ability to sustain ourselves as a program, and ask that the YAF Coordinator position be reinstated beyond the currently-promised two years.

We ask that PYM does not sideline the voices of Young Adult Friends, young Friends, and Friends of color. We believe that PYM's Spirit-led witness and ministry in the world is more important than administrative concerns, and should be funded accordingly. We believe that religious education ministries for all ages at the Yearly Meeting level are vital and essential to who we are as a spiritual community. We know that racism is real and harms us every day, both Friends of Color and white Friends, albeit differently. We know that we need to work actively against racism *in ourselves and in our organizations* to be able to heal ourselves, our community, and our society. We are PYM, and we ask that you hear our voice.

As you embark on addressing feedback on the proposed staffing changes, we have some specific requests:

- Maintain the Young Adult Friends Coordinator position, with the responsibilities in the current job description, with a commitment beyond the two years' reprieve.
- Involve the YAF community in the hiring process of the Young Adult Friends Coordinator this spring so as to minimize the gap in the important work our coordinator does.
- For the Associate Secretary for Program & Religious Life, whose lack of communication with our community led to such a profound breach of trust, to initiate an ongoing

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/GSFM201703>

² <https://marilleheallis.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/301-days-and-counting/>

discussion addressing how the Yearly Meeting and the YAF Community can move forward in rebuilding a connection.

- Reverse the reduction of Marille Thomas’s hours, reinstate her previous salary, and undertake an independent review to identify whether workplace abuse has taken place. Further, understanding that this instance of institutional racism is not unique in our Yearly Meeting, engage the community to develop and publicize a plan to review such decisions in the future to limit the effect of unconscious racial bias on our Yearly Meeting.
- A pause on implementing the Youth Programs changes, pending the report of the Youth Programs Sprint’s recommendations and input from the constituents themselves.
- Be transparent about the administrative leadership’s discernment process by communicating proactively to the YAF community.

Background

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting recently proposed staff cuts that would collapse four religious education/youth development staff (the Children’s Religious Life Coordinator, Middle School Friends Coordinator, Young Friends Coordinator, and Young Adult Friends Coordinator) into one position that would, presumably, cover birth to age 35. These staff cuts would allow the yearly meeting to expand staffing in the areas of HR, communications, and fundraising. The changes are proposed to “move us closer into alignment with... the needs of our wider yearly meeting community,” with the vision of a yearly meeting “that is strengthened in our collective ministry through greater connection.”³ On March 25, an announcement was made that the YAF Coordinator position would be maintained for two years before being re-examined.

We are PYM. We are a community of meetings, members and seekers who support each other in faith, practice and witness.⁴ Anytime we as a body make a decision to lay off ministries/program staff in favor of administration, we are making a statement of priorities. With the proposed changes, we are saying that raising money and donor management is more important than the work of the Spirit that our yearly meeting was created to facilitate, more important than our corporate ministry to our communities and to the world. Is this who we want to be? Is this the direction that Spirit is calling us?

The Yearly Meeting structure was created to enable the Spirit to unite people across multiple monthly meetings to work toward shared goals of ministry. The past decades have seen so many cuts to programmatic staff that it is worth thinking about whether we are still attaining that goal.

We are also concerned that the decision to cut staff was made by a very small group of people, with little transparency. The process was never presented to the body, and was made without the waiting for the input of the Youth Programs Sprint, who were in the process of eliciting feedback and making recommendations. A change that so heavily affects Youth Programs amounts to a change in vision, and such changes should come before the body of the Yearly Meeting.

³ <http://www.pym.org/staff-changes/>

⁴ <http://www.pym.org>

Young Adult Friends as a ministry of inclusion

The YAF community has always been a ministry of inclusion in our Yearly Meeting. The loving support of our YAF community is what allows many of us to stay Quaker in an atmosphere of dismissal and ageism in our monthly meetings and at Annual Sessions.⁵ We count among our seekers members, attenders, and non-Quaker seekers. As a ministry of inclusion, part of our role is to hold everyone accountable to keeping the work of the Yearly Meeting inclusive. In this role, we are often led to say things we know others do not want to hear. **We are led to point out the barriers to full inclusion of people of color, transgender people, young people, and people with disabilities: all growth edges for our Yearly Meeting.** In 2014, through our participation in the Spiritual Formation Program, that program came to understand that certain structures would have to change to be truly intergenerational. This is never a popular message, but it is a True one. If Spirit is leading us to equality, we need to live equality in all aspects of our faith and practice.

A concern for unconscious racial bias in the staffing changes

PYM has made a commitment to work to be an anti-racist organization, and we want to be a part of that. It is not inclusive or anti-racist to demote and cut hours of one of the few people of color on staff and to lay off several of the younger staff who have the most experience with anti-racism work. We know that policy decisions that disproportionately affect marginalized people need to be held to a higher standard of discernment; these decisions are often influenced by unconscious bias. **We also know that laying off and demoting those who have worked the most toward antiracism has a chilling effect on staff's ability to challenge unconscious bias in an organization. We ask that you allow the great staff who are already a part of PYM to be allowed to fully exercise their gifts.**

We ask that the reduction of Marille Thomas's hours be reversed, that her previous salary be reinstated, and that the Administrative Council of PYM develop a plan to review such decisions in future to ensure that unconscious racial bias is not a factor. We further ask for a review of the decision to reduce her hours, to be undertaken by a group with experience and knowledge of the manifestations of institutional racism, to identify whether workplace abuse has taken place.⁶

Since the election, many of us in our meetings, as pacifists and people who believe deeply in justice, have been trying to discern how to live and function in a new paradigm that is narrow, xenophobic, and mean. Many First Days, we hear messages that walk the line of despair and faith. We are all struggling to find where Spirit is calling us, individually and corporately, in this struggle to live into justice.

Listen to the voices of the marginalized, for we also struggle for justice: How do you engage with a society that tells you that you don't matter? How do you stay present with a community that marginalizes you? The bitter and beautiful truth is, that things will stay exactly the same if we do not engage, if we follow our instincts to reject the society that we feel has rejected us. We must

⁵ <http://www.pym.org/pym-young-adult-friends-epistle-2016/>

⁶ <https://marilleheallis.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/301-days-and-counting/>

stay, and we must struggle. But where do we find the strength to hold others (and ourselves!) to account, envision the real beloved Kingdom, and work to bring the majority into alignment with real justice and equity?

As on the societal level, so on the local level. Young adults, people of color, and LGBTQ people find time and time again that we are called to challenge our organizations, our communities, and our houses of worship to live deeper into our commitment to peace, justice, and equality. This is not a role we necessarily choose, but it is one that Spirit calls us to in our communities. As young adults in a Religious Society that is heavily white and over 50, our voice is by necessity often advocating for a ministry of inclusion that will transform us all and draw us deeper into the Way of the Divine. This is what we've learned, and it is a gift that can inform us all as we discern our corporate response to troubling times.

In 2011, the YAFs of PYM said, "Philadelphia Yearly Meeting must strive to remain open to Spirit-Led wisdom from all voices, even when those voices come from surprising places, express uncomfortable truths, or challenge the established and entrenched wisdom of our leaders."⁷ Some of those YAFs left because they felt that the Yearly Meeting community was not holding them, and we still grieve their loss. Some have stayed, and some were Led back.

A concern for Youth Programs

Our Youth Programs will be drastically altered due to the proposed changes. The decision to restructure was made before the work of the Youth Programs Sprint, who were to bring recommendations, was even finished. But even more importantly, this decision was made without the input of the people most affected, the young people themselves. This is not the first time the Yearly Meeting has tried to make decisions on behalf of its young people with no consultation. When will PYM live up to its promise to be truly intergenerational?

Furthermore, the "casual staff" proposed under the new plan represent an unsustainable employment model. It is neither ethical nor realistic to create very-part-time jobs with no benefits and expect workers to make a long-term commitment. We know that people grow in faith through their relationships with others. Our young people point to their ongoing relationships with facilitators as being one of the most meaningful aspects of the Youth Programs.

We call on the Yearly Meeting to pause its decision to restructure Youth Programs until the Youth Programs Sprint has made its recommendations and the participants of PYM's Youth Programs have had the opportunity to provide their input.

A concern for Young Adult Friends programming

While we have been informed that the YAF Coordinator position will continue through September 2019 before being re-examined, we are greatly concerned that a decision was made to cut funding without the Yearly Meeting ever reaching out to the Young Adult Friends at all.

⁷ <http://www.pym.org/young-adult-friends-epistle-2011/>

The lumping in of YAFs with other youth programs points to a deep misunderstanding of our program and the needs of Young Adult Friends in PYM. The staff person who made this decision without input from the YAF community is responsible for a huge loss of trust in our Yearly Meeting.

The YAF Program addresses the particular needs of a subsection of the adult population of PYM. In this, the YAF Coordinator position has more in common with the Care & Aging Coordinator than with the youth programs. It has always been concerning that our programs are lumped in with youth programs, for our needs are very distinct. At the same time, the needs of young adults in Quakerism are just as distinct from those of older adults. For older adult Quakers, the monthly meeting structure supports individuals in their stage of life and how they relate to Quakerism. This doesn't work as well for young people. We were told that this staffing cut was made "in favor of a different approach toward engaging with monthly and quarterly meetings more intentionally."⁸ But both youth programs and the Young Adult Friends program bubbled up from local Friends to the yearly meeting level because most monthly meetings do not have enough young people in the meeting to be able to meet their specific needs or to have an age-cohort that can learn together. There are often only one or two Young Adult Friends in any particular meeting. This is true across multiple yearly meetings, that YAFs must come together from many meetings to have community. We believe that in order for a new structure to honor the experience of YAFs, it will need to continue to foster energy, community, and engagement with Spirit at the Yearly Meeting level.

YAFs have their own specific needs, being more transient and not as grounded in any particular monthly meeting. Furthermore, many YAFs choose to wait to engage regularly in a monthly meeting due to the ageism that many of us experience. In consequence, YAFs tend to identify with Friends as a whole instead of a particular meeting. PYM YAFs have found community, service, and the movement of Spirit in our retreats and our work together. **We have found that our community works best when we are centralized at the yearly meeting level.** We have grown together in our faith, practice, and witness. And we have found that we have much to offer the yearly meeting, as a ministry of inclusion. We, too, are PYM.

Given our unique needs, it has been a deep and essential blessing to have one point person who, in the midst of all the transience, is a consistent presence inviting people back into the Quaker community in a way that is accessible to us at this stage of life. The Young Adult Friends Coordinator is the lynchpin that knits our community together, making sure there is spiritual grounding to every retreat and coordinating events and committees between retreats. In 2011, the YAF Coordinator position was cut for several years. Unlike the youth programs, which are in the process of re-visioning, we are barely out of our last process of re-visioning; in 2014, the position was re-visioned and restored. In the intervening years, the community really struggled. Even the present clerks have struggled to know how and where to interact with PYM. Through the Coordinator's knowledge and facilitation, we are able to continue as a body within the yearly meeting instead of as a free-floating association of Quaker-ish young people. Unlike youth programs, our program is not shrinking, and we have seen new people at every retreat. What has changed, that we are again being asked to re-vision? We were told that the Youth Program sprints would not apply to us since our work is so different, and then we found that our Coordinator is in fact affected. What message is the Yearly Meeting sending to its young people,

⁸ <http://www.pym.org/staff-changes/>

the ones who will carry Quakerism into the future, by repeatedly telling us that the community where we find spiritual nourishment is not a ministry worthy of Yearly Meeting support, or at least not at a level that is actually effective?

Our coordinator holds our institutional memory, allowing programs to keep running, and is an advocate and spiritual nurturer for YAFs. The Yearly Meeting has said that with the new reorganization there will not be “as much space for the program facilitators to be in relationship with program participants between the events that they run.”⁹ For YAFs, being in that relationship **is** the basis of the entire position. We don’t believe that a staff member could unite the community without being an integral part of it, in constant relation to everyone else.

Our YAF Coordinator bridges us to the Yearly Meeting, and many of us have become involved with the Yearly Meeting because of this tie. Moreover, Elizabeth Piersol Schmidt carries a profound leading to nurture young people into a deeper association with the Divine and with each other, and PYM gave her the means to make that ministry flower in the world. It is a profound loss to our community that Elizabeth has accepted a position elsewhere due to the announced staff changes. This would not have happened if PYM had reached out to YAFs in the first place, and been willing to listen. Our loss of Elizabeth is compounded by a loss of trust in the leadership of PYM for repeating the very act that led to a loss of both trust and programming in 2011. The restoration of the position for two years is thus bittersweet. We have been granted a reprieve, but are being told that in two years we’ll have to face the question of whether the Yearly Meeting truly values the needs of its Young Adult Friends again.

We are PYM, and we ask that you hear our voice.

With love and peace,
The Young Adult Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Approved at meeting for worship with concern for business at the YAF Spring Retreat
9th day of the fourth month, 2017
Allison Letts, clerk, and Janaki Spickard-Keeler, recording clerk

⁹ <http://www.pym.org/youth-young-adult-programs-staff-changes-follow-information/>