Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to Review the Extra Day of Annual Session

Committee Members: Bill Ashworth, John Allcott, Lynn Travis, Chris Willard

The Committee’s Charge:
The evaluation plan adopted by North Pacific Yearly Meeting at their Annual Session in 2008 as part of the Structure Implementation Committee’s recommendations states: “During FY 2011-12, NPYM will evaluate the addition of a day to NPYM’s Annual Session… A report with recommendations will be given to Annual Session in 2012.” The Ad Hoc Committee (aka 4/5 Committee) was appointed at the October 2011 Coordinating Committee Meeting and began their deliberations shortly thereafter using telephone conference calls.

The Committee’s Process:
As the committee met it became clear to us that, in order to come to conclusions and possible recommendations, we would need to gain some facts about why Friends in NPYM either attended or did not attend Annual Session. We also were aware of the need to consult widely among the Yearly Meeting using whatever means were at our disposal to share the experiences associated with Annual Session.

To that end we decided to field an on-line survey using the “Survey Monkey” tool to gather demographic information, identify behaviors and opinions about Annual Session attendance so as to better understand our membership. In addition we worked to produce queries for Monthly Meetings to use in seasoning. The queries were designed to elicit feedback regarding the spiritual aspects of Annual Session involving Plenaries, Meeting for Memorials and Worship as well as practical aspects such as activity flow, the timing and cost of AS.

In addition the committee participated in two telephone consultations called by Coordinating Committee inviting both Coordinating Committee members and Meeting contact people to participate in seasoning the 4/5 Committee’s work.

The Results of our Process:
1. Survey results - 237 people responding
   - 54% had not attended AS in the last 3 years, 16.5% had attended all of the last 3 Annual Sessions.
   - The number one factor for not attending AS was scheduling conflicts (work, vacation, other); the number two reason was living distance from the AS site or lack of adequate vacation time.
   - 20% of those in both the “attended” and “not attended” groups cited cost as a factor in attendance; 40% indicated that lower cost or better financial aid would make attendance more likely.
   - 38% of respondents cited “informal fellowship” as the most important reason to attend AS; 32% cited “conducting business” as the most important function for NPYM carried out at AS.
2. Coordinating Committee Phone Consultations – 2 conference calls, 15 people participated in the two calls 4 of those 15 attended both calls.
   Call #1 December 11, 2011 – The plan of the Ad Hoc 4/5 Committee was laid out for those attending the call with a plea that they assist in getting members of their Meetings to both take the on-line survey and find time in their Meetings to discuss the queries the committee had prepared. Two questions were posed for some worship sharing time on the call: What aspects of Annual Session do you like? What aspects of Annual Session do you dislike?
     - Likes – Worship Sharing; being with seasoned Friends who have been a part of Quakerism for a long time; extended opportunities for worship with a concern for business; opportunities for growth in the Spirit; Unity of purpose; the sense of “all hands on deck”; the integration of youth into AS programming; building a real community.
     - Dislikes – AS jobs sometimes take up too much time and prevent more meaningful participation; newcomers have not always experienced the kind of welcome they anticipated; the framing of anticipated goals from plenary sessions has not always been clear and materials have not always been available in a timely fashion to read before arriving at AS.
   Call #2 February 2, 2012 – Based on survey results two queries were presented for worship sharing time: What motivates
you to come to Annual Session? How can we individually and organizationally better communicate those motivations to our Meetings and Friends we encounter individually?

❖ Motivation: associating closely with a large gathering of like-mined friends who share values, beliefs and outlook on life – enrichment in the diversity of Friends backgrounds – demonstrating to children how Quakerism works, what a rich experience both worshipful fun and business can be – being able to share responsibilities is a motivating factor.

❖ Better communication: Young people should do a better job of telling their stories to those even younger than themselves about their journeys of being a part of children’s gatherings to Central Friends to Jr. Friends to Young Friends and finding new purpose at each stage. Don’t underestimate the power of personal invitation, what an official notice or communication cannot do for a hesitant newcomer the personal invite may accomplish.

❖ Some discussion of barriers to attendance: Financial aid can be difficult for some to ask for, if pride seems to be the issue could it be suggested that the assistance was a “loan”. If the work of the Annual Session benefits the entire Yearly Meeting would it not make sense for some or all of the program cost for putting the event on be shared by the entire membership of the Yearly Meeting?

❖ With regards to the question of 4 vs. 5 days, one Friend suggested that maybe the wrong question was being asked…maybe if AS was even longer the needs for fellowship and business could be accomplished in a more relaxed and open feeling space.

3. Monthly Meeting Seasoning via queries – Only two Meetings reported to us that they had spent any time together discussing our queries or any of the issues related to the evaluation of the extra day of Annual Session. Several reported to us that they were too busy seasoning other Yearly Meeting concerns which are on this year’s agenda, several expressed their Meeting had “seasoning fatigue”, others had experienced recent deaths in the Meeting and had no energy or enthusiasm for the work. The points brought forward from the two Meeting who did discuss the issue were:

❖ Whether we go back to 4 days, keep it at 5 or extend the time of Annual Session even more, NPYM should do a better job of attending to the number of activities so as to prevent overlaps and conflicts where attenders must choose what to go to.

❖ Business is/should be core to the Annual Session, it should be emphasized as “Worship for Business”.

❖ The value of Annual Session is the sense of Spirit available in a larger gathering that is not available in smaller Meetings

❖ The workshop experience is motivational

❖ The opportunity for inter-generational activities brings unique energy to the gathering

❖ Concerns were raised about having enough volunteers for children’s program during a 5 day gathering.

❖ In the end neither Meeting found clearness on whether a 4 or 5 day session was the best.

The Committee’s Conclusions:
At our last meeting, in person, over lunch at a Coordinating Committee Meeting in April we reviewed what we had been able to discern from the surveys, phone consultations and Meeting seasonings. We came to clarity that nothing we had heard was raised to the level of a recommendation for keeping or eliminating the “extra” day (five vs. four) of Annual Session. Most of the participants in these outreaches wanted to talk about efforts to improve on what we were already doing with Annual Session without diminishing the experience of both fellowship and doing business. They, mostly by elimination of mention, indicated that the number of days was not of major concern. Our recommendation, stemming from the above-mentioned conclusions, is that Annual Session remain a five day event so as to provide space for the Business identified by respondents as important work and the Fellowship identified as an important draw for Friend’s attendance at Annual Session.

The Committee identified the following opportunities for NPYM’s future consideration regarding Annual Session:

❖ Explore ways to announce Annual Session to Friends earlier and with “enthusiastic” information.

❖ In what ways could Annual Session be made even more family friendly so as to provide opportunities for expanded intergenerational activities?

❖ Are there ways/willingness to explore reduction in personal/family cost for Annual Session in an effort to
attract more participants?
❖ How can the balance between fellowship and doing business be better achieved to allow participants a “full spectrum” experience?
❖ For more insight on future improvement opportunities refer to comments in the phone consultations and Meeting Seasonings.

We thank the Yearly Meeting for the opportunity to serve you. We ask, if this report is accepted, that the Ad Hoc Committee to Review the Extra Day of Annual Session be laid down.