

**Reflections on Australia Yearly Meeting (AYM) Structure
for the CYM Consultation and Renewal Working Group
Pamela Leach , May 12, 2006**

Introduction

During my recent visit to Australia, I was moved by the parallel challenges faced by AYM and CYM—a vast land, thinly but widely inhabited by Friends, concerns for cost of travel and environmental footprint, and the desire for a lively Society in which Friends do know each other in the things that are eternal, and are enabled to work together for the peaceable kingdom. I believe that the manner of organization of AYM has contributed to Australian Friends' delightfully lively spiritual condition. The following account will, I hope, provide you with a glimpse of their regional structural arrangements, which I think present an interesting 'middle ground' for Canadian Friends to reflect upon. Much of it is based upon (or cribbed directly from) either the existing 4th edition of the AYM Handbook (Discipline) or the draft 5th edition. I am most grateful for the extensive help of Friends Katherine Purnell and Edward Linacre, both of Canberra Regional Meeting and the AYM Handbook Committee, for their assistance in making improvements and corrections to this report. Opinions and errors remain my own.

Friends are no doubt well aware that Australia (7,600,000 square kilometers, in comparison to Canada's 9,700,000) is a country of approximately 20 million inhabitants with a long history of Friendly presence. British Friends first traveled to Australia in 1832 to witness to their faith, to investigate the penal system, to ascertain the treatment of Aboriginal people by white settlers, and to promote temperance. An early institution, Friends School in Hobart, Tasmania dates from 1887 and has today over 1000 students.¹ The population distribution is characterized by large urban centres (with large urban Meetings) and sparse rural areas where Friends are represented by a few isolated individuals. Some worship groups are located thousand(s) of kilometers from the nearest Meeting.

Regional Meetings: AYM, as we see it today, is comprised of seven regional Meetings. In fact AYM is a 1901 amalgamation (with some modifications) of the Monthly or Quarterly Meetings of the different autonomous colonies, which in the early years related separately to London Yearly Meeting. Each Regional Meeting consists of one or more local Meetings and has under its care such worship groups as exist within the region. Membership is held in the Regional Meeting. Regional Meetings conduct business on a regular basis, often monthly. They circulate their minutes to all other Regional Meeting clerks. This allows for consultation, for example where Regional Meetings are dealing with similar issues.

Key aspects to note from this regionalization include:

- All of continental Australia and Tasmania are included in these regions
- Many AYM committees are regionalized, that is, 'hosted' by one Regional Meeting
 - Consequent savings in travel and environmental costs
 - Local Friends are drawn into the AYM business through the hosting of 'resident' AYM committees
 - Decentralized process limits expectations around AYM administration, office and office holders
- Relative to CYM, there is little face-to-face interaction between Regional Meetings on hosted AYM business outside of YM sessions
- Regionalized committees tend to be adopted by Regional Meetings with previous experience or with Friends who have experience in this kind of service; in other words, not all Regional Meetings host equally
- Some committees are hosted by the same Meeting for many years

¹ AYM appoints the board of governors of Friends School. Nine members are appointed from the Regional Meetings and seven from the Tasmanian community.

YM sessions: These week-long sessions occur annually in January, moving each year to a different part of the country, and find roughly one quarter to one third of the 900 or so members in attendance. YM sessions include Meeting for Worship for Business, ‘summer school’ (adult study programme), a young Friends camp, and gathering-type activities similar to those at CYM. AYM has experimented with non-residential sessions where no suitable site has presented itself. YM does not meet in regions of the country where there is not sufficient capacity to run the Operational Committee (=Programme Committee and Local Arrangements Committee) or where there is no suitable venue. A recent experiment in having Friends register online and with significant discounts for early registration has greatly limited the work of receiving Friends at YM.

Young Friends: There are two regular gatherings of YFs each year, one at Easter and another at YM, apart from other formal and informal occasions. Contact is maintained with New Zealand counterparts. There is a web-site (<http://youngfriends.co-operista.com/tiki-index.php>) and considerable emailing within the group, as well as a forum (through the Quaker Forum).

AYM Committees: AYM has committees that are regionalized or ‘hosted’, and others that are not. Quaker Service Australia (QSA) can be regarded as a hybrid (see QSA section below).

Non-regionalized Committees: Non-regionalized committees include those that are representative (such as Standing Committee and AYM Nominations Committee) and those that are expert (such as the Backhouse Lecture Committee).

AYM Standing Committee (=Representative Meeting and CMM &C) meets on the day prior to YM sessions—mainly to look at the budget and to advise on the agenda—and on one other occasion. Standing Committee has responsibility for overall pastoral care of AYM, including the fostering of links and intervisitation, and for assisting any Regional Meeting needing help. (In fact, it is not entirely clear how the pastoral responsibilities are carried out, but much is delegated to Regional Meetings e.g. care of isolated Friends). Standing Committee is responsible for taking action on decisions of YM which are not placed in other hands, matters that cannot wait for consideration by YM in session, and administrative matters such as timetabling YM sessions. Standing Committee also deals with minor matters to save time in YM sessions, and can approve changes of membership of any AYM committee where necessary. Nowhere is there mention of Standing Committee being “YM out of session.”

Standing Committee normally accepts AYM’s annual budget after it has been sent to Regional Meetings for their comments and before transmitting it to YM. Standing Committee neither deals with matters that are properly dealt with by YM, nor, usually, does it initiate topics for decision or public pronouncement. It may not veto any YM decision. Its minutes are to be made available to all members of AYM, excepting specifically confidential minutes.

The members of Standing Committee are the Presiding Clerk, the AYM Secretary (=General Secretary), the AYM Treasurer, the immediate Past Presiding Clerk (for two years after leaving office), and the incoming Presiding Clerk in the twelve months prior to taking office. There are two representatives of Young Friends and two Friends appointed by each Regional Meeting on an annual basis, with each to serve not more than three consecutive years/terms.

Travel is paid by AYM for members to attend the mid-year meeting of Standing Committee, but members of SC assume their own costs (with assistance where necessary from their Regional Meeting) to attend YM sessions. There is no central fund for helping remote Friends attend.

AYM Nominations Committee consists of one Friend from each region and a young Friend. Proxies are arranged for specific absences. (It should be noted that because of regionalization the role of this committee is significantly reduced compared to that of CYM.) When vacancies occur on regionalized or hosted committees after the initial slate has been approved, the appropriate Regional Meeting finds new names, which are sent to Nominations Committee and eventually to AYM or Standing Committee for final approval. AYM Nominations Committee usually meets twice a year, with Standing Committee (so its

members are not infrequently also members of Standing Committee). It is responsible for nominating the AYM Presiding Clerk, AYM Treasurer, an auditor (not a member of the Religious Society of Friends, must be convenient to the Treasurer), AYM Clerk's Advisory Committee, editor of the *Australian Friend*, Editorial Committee of the *Australian Friend*, the Backhouse Lecture Committee, the Donald Groom Fellowship Committee, the Thanksgiving Fund Committee, delegates to outside bodies, and any other appointment that YM may lay upon it.

The Backhouse Lecture Committee, an 'expert committee,' arranges the annual lecture that takes place during YM sessions (=SPG). Its members are appointed by YM for six years on the recommendation of the AYM Nominations Committee. The nominees are selected for skills in writing, publishing and knowledge of relevant topics and speakers, rather than Regional Meeting representation.

Excepting specific needs, travel funds are not normally available beyond Standing Committee's midyear meeting. Long-distance work is accomplished by mail, email or phone, with face-to-face meetings where required during YM sessions or mid-year Standing Committee.

Regionalized committees: Regional Meetings host most AYM committees (and are hence known as 'hosted committees' in AYM) and carry that part of AYM business. Efforts are made to include isolated Friends and worship groups in this AYM committee work. Most regionalized or hosted committees serve for three years but may offer or be requested to host for another three years if things are going well (often in practice this can be extended further in some cases e.g. QSA). The allocation depends on the practicalities of the moment rather than any scheduled rotation. One Friend reports that Meetings have not been possessive and are usually relieved to have the AYM committee passed on to another Regional Meeting. In general nominations are made in the Regional Meeting but approved at Yearly Meeting. Regional Meetings offer to host an AYM committee after discerning if there is a concern and Friends willing to attend to the business in question. If several Regional Meetings offer to host, Nominations Committee will discern but YM will take the final decision.

Operational YM Committees (=Programme Committee and Local Arrangements Committee in one) serve for three years in preparation for the year in which they host the YM sessions. Therefore a new committee needs to be struck each year in anticipation of the YM to occur in three years, and there are three such committees active concurrently at any time.

Other examples of AYM committees that are hosted by Regional Meetings include the *Australian Friend* Committee, the Finance Committee (three Friends selected from the Treasurer's Regional Meeting), the Presiding Clerk's Advisory Committee, the Secretary's Advisory Committee, the Quaker Peace and Legislation Committee, the Publications Committee, Handbook Revisions Committee (=Discipline Review Committee), the Indigenous Concerns Committee, and working groups (e.g. issues of Child Protection and Sexual Abuse & Misconduct).

Manuals play an important role in sustaining institutional memory, e.g. for Operational YM Committees to plan and prepare for YM sessions. A recent experiment with having Operations Committee manual on a readable CD-ROM has been well received. Travel funds are not normally available for the work of regionalized committees, though there are occasional exceptions for specific needs, e.g. expertise on Child Protection. Most long-distance work is done by phone or email, or meeting during YM sessions or mid-year Standing Committee if people are available.

Quaker Service Australia (QSA): QSA is what we might call a 'hybrid' committee of the AYM with both a representative and a hosted component. Its membership comprises Friends appointed by YM or Standing Committee, a representative appointed by each Regional Meeting, the Presiding Clerk and AYM Secretary ex-officio. In addition, the QSA committee must not have fewer than seven members (excluding ex-officio members), who are nominated by and representative of the host Regional Meeting. QSA appoints its own Convenor, Treasurer and Public Officer and the members of its committee from within the host Regional Meeting. Changes are confirmed by the next YM or Standing Committee. The committee determines the

projects which QSA supports with regard to the current management plan of QSA and to Project Selection Guidelines approved by YM. This committee is incorporated in New South Wales and accredited by the federal agency AusAID.

Meeting for Learning: One way Australian Friends mitigate the decentralized character of their Yearly Meeting and enhance fellowship opportunities is through the work of this committee, responsible for programs of personal spiritual development. It provides two week-long retreats, a year apart, and a year-long project of research. It also oversees a distance-learning course called Quaker Basics. Financial support for the committee's work comes from direct donations, grants, special funds and from Regional Meetings. Anecdotal reports suggest Meeting for Learning has been enormously powerful as a tool for revitalization.

The Australia-Wide Quaker Fellowship: This inreach and outreach programme of AYM offers regular mailings (approx. three a year) on facets of Quaker life and thought for isolated Friends and other interested individuals who join the fellowship. It also encourages the production of such materials in the Regional Meetings.

AYM Secretary: (=General Secretary) This Friend, employed in a four fifths capacity, is the executive officer of the Society in Australia. Among the duties of the Secretary is the expectation of visitation to Meetings throughout Australian and to isolated Friends. In consultation with the Presiding Clerk, a Regional Meeting clerk (and possibly Standing Committee), the Secretary may speak in public on the Society and its testimonies, and contributes to outreach as skills, interest and opportunity afford. The Secretary is *ex officio* on most committees. The Secretary coordinates the Australian Quaker home page. The initial term of appointment is three years, and following review, two possible subsequent terms. The AYM office is located with the AYM Secretary, who is its only staff person (bookkeeping is done by the AYM treasurer, unpaid). The Secretary is supported by an advisory committee from her home Regional Meeting. The AYM Secretary publishes her own newsletter with an interesting, important and timely updates about the life of AYM, and providing occasional news of Regional Meetings and other issues relevant to Friends.

Website: Friends who wish to know more about Australian Friends, to read publications such as the Secretary's latest newsletter, the *Australian Friend*, or to peruse the 4th ed. of the Handbook (=O&P) should consult the AYM website at quakers.org.au. It should be noted that through "Quaker Forum" a wide range of electronic forums are available for and with Australian Friends, on issues such as inspiration, the life of the Meeting, Peace, Social Justice, Environment, and Friendly Events. Particularly of note is the existence of a forum on Yearly Meeting (which seems to focus very much on discussion relating to the YM in session).

Conclusion

This brief tour represents only a (possibly blurry) snapshot of the life of AYM from one who was only a very brief sojourner in the life of one Regional Meeting. However, I hope it is sufficiently evocative to give you a sense of if or where parallels and potential may lie. If nothing else, it may be some consolation to Canadian Friends to be reminded that others are similarly exercised by issues such as travel, geography, and right use of resources, and that there may be many possible approaches to our challenges. I hope you will hold Australian Friends in the Light as they too discern and work at fostering the life of the Society.

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