

Survey FAQs

When Counting Counts: An Intro from BYM's Outreach and Inclusion Coordinator

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When Counting Counts: An Intro from BYM's Outreach and Inclusion Coordinator

As a mixed-heritage person, I know what it's like to be confused or uneasy about checking boxes and quantifying an identity. We know that age is often just a number and that race as a biological concept does not exist. We know that as full human beings we are each so much more nuanced and complex than any categorization can account for. And we know that numbers in a room are never the complete story. Yet, we know also that in the context of our society, each of us can have very different experiences based on our heritage and the ways the world perceives us. Because of this, these identities can have a very real impact in our day to day lives and on determining the communities with whom we end up sharing fellowship. As BYM commits to taking on increasing participation of young adults and people of color, it is important for us to have ways to recognize the demographics of our current community and to assess how that changes over time. This survey is one—though certainly not the only—method we will use to do this.

While no system of categorization will ever be perfect, every effort has been made to make an inclusive list. Spaces are left next to each description so that if something more specific (like a particular term, tribe, country of origin, or other clarification) feels like a better fit, it can be added. The following questions and answers serve to illuminate and express the deep care and thought which have gone into this process of collecting information as well as some of the vision we hope to achieve through both the results and process of doing so. Our hope is that—in addition to giving us concrete measures to work with—learning about and being interested in each other's heritage and life-stage in all the different ways that is defined might open us up to deeper knowledge, sharing, and understanding.

1) What are these new questions all about?

The questions regarding age and racial/ethnic identity are part of BYM's new Growing Diverse Leadership Initiative. The GDL initiative is designed to strengthen our faith and communities by increasing the participation of and quality of experience for young adults and people of color in our local and Yearly Meetings. For more information, see the GDLI webpage on BYM's website (Coming Spring 2017).

2) How do we know how people identify or how old they are?

If individuals have not already shared how they identify or their ages, there are a number of thoughtful ways to find that out. You could conduct a survey in which you ask this information along with other things that you would find useful to know for your own programming such as evaluations of events or ideas for the Meeting. This is common in many places of worship and can be another way to get input from regular attenders and connect to and bring in new attenders. We will soon be providing sample surveys to help Meetings develop their own.

You can also add these questions to any place where you are already gathering information. For instance, do you have a way of gathering contact information? Are there places where people RSVP or register for other activities or events where you are collecting information?

It can be included in your membership process. As people become members they, of course, share lots about themselves in a thorough and thoughtful process that could include this demographic information as well.

As Meetings work on collecting this information there will be opportunities to share experiences, ideas, and best practices on how to do it effectively.

3) *Why are we looking at age and race specifically? What about other forms of diversity?*

Our commitment to honoring the Light in everyone calls us to invite diversity and equity with regard to many social identities in addition to racial/ethnic identity and age (such as sexual orientation, gender, class, region, ability, to name but a few). None of these is more important than another and BYM will continue to support and encourage all ongoing efforts with regard to each of them. However, some areas of equity have proven more challenging than others and when diversity efforts remain broad, it can be hard to make inroads on these particularly sticky ones. We believe these will require the additional focused attention of this new initiative.

While Quakers have taken an interest in racial equity since our early years in this country, the Religion Society of Friends in the United States remains overwhelmingly White. This indicates that if we are hoping to move forward more on racial diversity in the next couple decades than we have in the last couple centuries, we will need to put concentrated effort in that direction. Age also presents a unique challenge. Many have noticed that the median age of Quakers in the US has increased steadily over the last few decades, and that many local and Yearly Meetings have declined in numbers. As we look to the future, focusing on growing & embracing young adult leadership in a country where that population is increasingly diverse helps us sustain both our values and our faith community.

Furthermore, genuine inclusion and equity work is never zero-sum. Young people and people of color come from all different backgrounds with regard to sexual orientation, gender, class, region, ability, etc. and there will be many opportunities for overlap and collaboration on these issues. As we strengthen and stretch our understanding around any form of inclusion, we become ever more adept at applying learning to many forms of inclusion.

4) *Does the race question pertain to everyone or just the young adults?*

The race/ethnicity question pertains to everyone.

5) *What is the significance of the age categories used?*

The youth ages give us information relevant to youth programs by matching up with categories for our camps and youth conferences. The adult age categories are selected for two reasons. 1) Different organizations and programs have different definitions of the term “young adult”. Some define it as under 25, others as under 30, under 35 and many Quakers use under 40. As we partner with other organizations and funders, it is useful for us to know how many members fit in these categories. 2) These categories match up roughly with certain life-stages, such as college/post high-school years, years where many are working independently, years where many are starting new families, retiring etc. This gives us a rough outline of some programming that might be helpful without adding a new set of more specific questions.

6) ***Why use the term ‘race’? Doesn't recording someone's age or race/ethnicity mean creating an arbitrary label?***

We know that race as a biological concept does not exist. We know that as full human beings we are each so much more nuanced and complex than any categorization can account for. Yet, we know also that in the context of our society, our life-stages and racial/ethnic *identities* can have a huge impact on our experience of and interactions with the world and our Meetings. Though these reflect different experiences of the world *not* innate differences, they can nevertheless have a very real impact in our day to day. Sometimes these experiences are shaped by our cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Sometimes (because ethnic background is not always visible) they are shaped by how we are visibly perceived or racialized. By opening up discussion around these factors we are attempting not to diminish each other but rather to understand each other more fully. Just as our similarities are a strength, so too are our differences and we do not need to be afraid of acknowledging them. In fact, research has shown that acknowledging racial/ethnic identity leads to less bias in members of the majority group and better mental health outcomes for people in minority groups than does ignoring race or "colorblindness."

Also, it's important to note that the significance people place on their racial/ethnic identity can itself be shaped by the ways in which they identify. For instance, one 2015 study showed that %68 of African Americans and %49 of Hispanic people ranked their racial identity as "Very important" to them, while only %17 of White Americans did so. If you look at those who feel it is "very important or somewhat important" this number rises to %86 of African Americans and %87 of Hispanic people. (YouGov, March 2015) Many people of color feel that they do not have the option of simply disregarding racial identity because it impacts so much of their lives. For those who feel their racial or ethnic identity is significant to them, ignoring or avoiding it can be very hurtful. Furthermore, the impact of *not* having access to this information about the Yearly Meeting (and the programming and changes it allows us to support) disproportionately affects those who may need this type of transformation in BYM in order to feel fully welcome and supported. It is very difficult to address an experience if we don't first begin by acknowledging it.

7) ***Why is this information necessary? How will it be used?*** Without this information, it would be nearly impossible to have a true sense of where we are with regard to participation of young adults and people of color in our Meetings or to track progress as we proceed. As we start creating ways to increase the participation and quality of experience of young adults and people of color, this information is one—but not the only—way we will establish a baseline and start keeping track of which actions have the biggest impact. Without our national census information, social-scientists would not be able to illustrate inequality, replicate positive trends, or tailor policy. In much the same way, we cannot fully grow and develop the BYM community without being able to see it fully. Furthermore, the process of putting our attention on these areas can be a useful social and spiritual practice in and of itself. (See question 8).

This information will NOT be used to place judgment on or marginalize individuals or Meetings. We recognize that each local Meeting is different as are the communities they exist within, the challenge they face with regard to diversity, and the unique strengths they bring. Many local Meetings have already begun taking on the testimony of equality with regard to age and/or racial/ethnic identity in a myriad of different ways that make sense for their unique communities and we hope to more will follow. Collecting data and best practices at the Yearly Meeting level allows us to learn from these diverse and creative approaches and to provide support for and solidarity with each other.

8) ***Why do we need this level of specificity with regard to race/ethnicity?***

There are several things to consider here. Some are practical and some are principal. On a practical level, knowing specific information about who is a part of our community helps us think about how to better serve the people here and helps in connecting to (and/or create) resources specifically for Friends with these identities where desired. It also allows us to gauge the particular communities to which there has or has not been success in connecting. Using categories that are fairly commonly used by other organizations/agencies allows us to compare our progress with those in other similarly situated groups/communities and our demographics with those in the areas of our Meetings. Beyond that, as we try to build diverse communities, we do so in acknowledgement that many people (and particularly people of color) have been labeled against their will. While categorizing will always lead to some limitation, allowing space for people to define themselves as fully as possible in this area is an important stand against this kind of oppression.

9) ***Won't this be difficult?***

We understand that this will take effort. We want to work together to make it work. We know that any additional information we try to collect as a community involves additional effort, especially in the beginning. Just like when we added information about youth, this new information will take some figuring out. No one expects the information collected to be perfect off the bat. Simply do the best you can. As local Meetings work on this, we are excited to have opportunities for all of us to share experiences, best practices, and creative ideas in this regard. This addition to the survey--like our overall commitment to living our value of equality--is a long-term effort and we hope each year it will become a little easier.

The process of putting our attention on these areas can be a useful social and spiritual practice in and of itself.

Quakers have long understood that there can be value in putting conscious attention on a topic and allowing ourselves to sit with and wrestle with it. The process of collecting and figuring out how to collect this information on racial/ethnic identity and age gives us the opportunity to put our attention on these issues. This could be an opportunity to learn new things about members of our Meeting or to correct assumptions we may have held. It could become an entry into being more aware of the make-up of the communities we inhabit (an act of solidarity with people in racial or age minorities who are often acutely aware of these dynamics). It could be used as way to warm up to deeper conversations about inclusion.

The behind the scenes work of equity building within our communities is important social justice work.

Though it can feel unglamorous, this work of getting a clear picture of our community's make-up is vital to the work of living into equity. To illustrate, many members of BYM have recently taken important stands on police violence by carrying Black Lives Matter banners at rallies or displaying them in front of their Meetings. However, we would not even be able to discuss or bring attention to disproportionate use of force against Black people if someone hadn't decided it mattered and was worth the effort to record the race of victims. Whether looking at health outcomes, education, effects of global warming etc, almost every group working for change in the world relies on such statistics to help them discern and communicate a way forward. And what better way to have integrity in that process then to turn that lens inward to our own communities. So if filling out forms or collecting papers or crunching numbers feels tedious, remember this work you are engaged in behind the scenes is every bit as much a part of change as any banner we could fly.