

Creating & Maintaining a Meeting Website



This pamphlet offers a series of Queries and Advices to help a Quaker meeting in setting up a website and what to include. It can also be helpful to a meeting considering various issues around a web presence or considering a redesign of their website.

Planning issues include:

- What purpose or purposes do you want the site to serve?
- Are you going to include information that will become outdated?
- Who is going to come up with an overall plan?
- Who is going to create it?
- Who is going to maintain it?
- Who will have ongoing responsibility for the site?

Website issues include:

- Items to include to help people find you
- Additional items you may wish to include
- Items to be careful about
- Design considerations for the webmaster
- Publicizing your site
- Helping internet users get to your site

Introduction

This document tries to give meetings and worship groups some information, a starting place for discussion, and specific suggestions in setting up or redesigning a website. Here are some things to consider, or, in proper Quaker style, Queries.

Queries

What purpose or purposes do you want the site to serve?

A website can be used to:

- Help seekers find you (outreach)
- Communicate within the meeting (internal communication)

Web pages geared toward seekers would include such things as:

- Visitors are always welcome
- Where and when you meet with directions
- Annual meeting calendar with times and dates
- Information on what to expect
- What will be done with children during worship
- Information on what Quakers believe
- Information on what local Quakers do
- The name, phone number, and e-mail address of a person who can answer inquiries

Web pages geared toward the internal needs of the meeting could include such things as:

- Meeting activities
- Upcoming events
- On-line newsletters

Do you include information that will become outdated?

Are you going to include dated information or are you going to set up a site that stays the same for long periods of time? Dated information will need to be updated in a timely fashion. Sites with outdated material give a terrible impression. When a seeker encounters an out of date meeting site, it is a turnoff.

A static site that describes the meeting and its activities in general terms but does not try to provide quickly outdated material seems to work well. It also minimizes the amount of work needed once it is set up.

What are the practical options for getting a website set up?

Your meeting does not need to design and write everything from scratch! There are currently several viable approaches you may want to explore for developing a website:

- Find someone in the meeting who is willing and able to set up a website. If no one in the meeting comes forward, look for:

- a spouse or relative of someone in the meeting
 - meeting teenagers or college students
 - a non-Quaker college student who will create the site as a service project
 - a professional who creates websites for a fee
- There are several options for the kind of software to use:
 - Write code directly in HTML (HyperText Markup Language), the standard coding used for websites worldwide
 - Use a software program such as Dreamweaver that provides a helpful menu-based program to generate HTML code. Full-function word processors such as Microsoft Word will also generate web pages, but they use a lot of unnecessary code and are not recommended as the only means of creating web pages.
 - Use an on-line utility such as WordPress, which works well and is free. It provides templates to establish the basic look and format of the site. One advantage of this approach is that new text can be generated by anyone with a word processor and multiple people can be authorized to add information and maintain the site. Information can be found at wordpress.org.
 - Use FGC's Quaker Cloud toolkit for meeting websites. In addition to a standard template, it includes special modules for storing minutes and for a meeting directory. For information, go to www.fgcquaker.org/services/quaker-cloud.
 - Check if your yearly meeting or affiliating organization (FGC, FUM, EFI) offers hosting and/or templates.
 - Several yearly meetings currently generate a simple one-page website with basic information for each affiliated meeting, either automatically or on request. If you develop your own site, ask the yearly meeting to link to your site instead. For information, check your yearly meeting's website or contact an appropriate committee.

There are websites with good designs already on the web that you can use as models. Some meeting websites to look at for ideas:

- Broadmead (NW Ohio): broadmead.quaker.org
- Midlothian (VA): midlothianfriends.org
- Live Oak (TX): www.friendshouston.org
- Patuxent (MD): www.patuxentfriends.org

It is also great to look at a number of other meeting websites to see what you do and don't like. You can find these easily through QuakerFinder (www.quakerfinder.org).

What do you need to know about websites?

Technical Issues

A host. You need to find someone with the necessary computer equipment to “host” the site. This means that the software, text pages, and pictures actually sit in the host's computer and take up a certain amount of space. It requires a computer that is set up to act as a web server—it is always on and has a permanent connection to the internet. Most meetings “rent” hosting space from a commercial service for a monthly or yearly fee. The Quaker Cloud includes hosting as part of its package.

A URL (Uniform Resource Locator address), also known as a domain name or web address. It usually starts with <http://www> and ends in *.com* or *.org*. Some hosts will provide you with a URL that starts with their web address. This doesn't cost anything, but it may give you an address that is hard to remember and difficult to type.

Another choice is to purchase a unique domain name. A number of companies that provide hosting offer free domain name registration when you sign up for their hosting service. Otherwise, there is a one-time registration fee of \$10 to \$35. In addition, you will have to pay a monthly or annual charge, currently between \$15 to \$35 a year, to keep it current. Although this incurs some expense, it gives you the opportunity to choose a URL that is short, memorable, and convenient. Visiting several domain registration services like register4less.com, www.godaddy.com, or www.register.com will provide you with more information and an idea of current prices. Do an internet search on "domain names" to find other providers.

Design

Web design has several major components:

- Content – what kind of information will be included?
- What it looks like – colors, format, graphics, etc. Will there be photos? graphics?
- Organization – how much information goes on each page? Will the user have to scroll down or is most material readily available by clicking on-screen?
- Navigation – how do users get from one page to another? The placement and kind of navigation used makes a big difference in how easy the site is to use.

Advices

If the first part of this document can be considered to be Queries for you to consider, the following part contains Advices, or in other words, suggestions, or even, dare we say, recommendations.

Suggested Meeting Process

Developing the website

When your meeting decides to set up or redesign a website, the next task is to come up with a specific proposal. This would include:

- where it will be hosted
- the URL
- costs (if any)
- who will create it
- the basic design
- the information to include on the site at this time

It is easier for one Friend with the guidance of a small committee to do the actual design of a website and submit it for Friends' comments and approval than for the entire meeting to try to design one. Many web utilities provide templates you can choose from. An ad hoc committee can discuss the issues, brainstorm ideas, and make specific recommendations to the whole meeting for its discussion and approval. Look for Friends who have technical know-how, creative ideas, design and writing skills, and/or interest in a meeting website to figure out how it might actually work. This ad hoc committee can do the necessary research, work out a preliminary design for the site, and bring a specific proposal to the business meeting for getting started.

When the meeting approves a proposal, the ad hoc committee and webmaster can flesh out the design, if needed, including:

- What it looks like – colors, format, graphics, etc.
- Organization – how much information goes on each page? Will the user have to scroll down or is most material readily available by clicking on-screen?
- Navigation: how do users get from one page to another?

Make a proposed design available to members of the meeting to look at or try out and solicit feedback. The business meeting needs to agree that it is comfortable letting the ad hoc committee and webmaster proceed along these lines. The meeting can agree to leave further detailed decisions to the committee or require that the final design be brought back for approval before going live.

Ongoing responsibility for the site

If the person who created the site is able to continue in the role of webmaster, that person can take on the responsibility for keeping the technical aspects of the site working—fixing any broken links, creating or deleting entire pages, etc. If that person is not available, the meeting will need to find someone else to maintain the site.

However, a site can be designed to make it easy for people with only a basic knowledge of word processing to update the contents. This shares the work and means that if the webmaster goes out of the country or has a computer problem, work on the site can continue.

When all is in place and running smoothly, the ad hoc committee can be replaced with a permanent committee to oversee the site, or this function can be assigned to an existing committee. It is a good idea for a committee to bear responsibility for the site rather than just the webmaster, who could be an *ex officio* member of the committee. This keeps the webmaster in touch with the wishes of the meeting and spreads the responsibility for maintaining the site. The webmaster should keep the committee informed of how to access the site, including passwords, so that if he or she is unavailable, the meeting still has access to the site.

Content

Looking at other meeting websites can help identify pieces of information or text you might want on your site. (Note: do not copy text or graphics from another site or from a book without obtaining permission from the copyright holder and including any copyright notice they require. Also, do not embed graphics in your site that are being pulled from another site—make a copy of any graphics you have permission to use. You can use FGC’s QuakerFinder (www.fgcquaker.org/connect/quaker-finder) to find meeting sites.

Items to include to help people find you

- How to get to meeting for worship
 - street address
 - really good directions & a map
 - time
 - day
- How to contact a real live Friend with questions via phone or e-mail. Make sure the contact information is kept up to date and that the Friend is responsive to such queries. If you use “Jane at lycos dot com” instead of “Jane@lycos.com” spammers can’t easily collect the e-mail address automatically.
- A brief description of the style of worship
- What the arrangements for children are

Additional items you may wish to include

- An invitation to join you for worship. If approved by the meeting, this can include an explicit invitation that mentions gay, lesbian, and transgender people, people of color, or other folks.
- A calendar of meeting activities
- A list of recurring activities such as business meeting, potluck, Yearly Meeting, etc.
- A calendar of upcoming events; remember that the more timely the information, the more maintenance will be required. Posting information as short news items in the format of a blog works well.
- A brief history of the monthly meeting
- A photo of the people in the meeting

- A photo of the meeting house
- Links to: your yearly meeting's website; any Quaker organization the yearly meeting is affiliated with (FGC's web address is www.fgcquaker.org); FGC's website for finding Quaker meetings (www.QuakerFinder.org); a Quaker website that provides links to a vast number of American Quaker sites (www.quaker.org); and other links

Items to be careful about

- Minutes from Business Meeting. Do not publish minutes awaiting approval; only minutes that have been approved should be posted to the web (unless they are on a secure part of the site available only to Friends).
- Information about individual Friends, especially contact information. No personal information should be posted without the explicit permission of that Friend. Do not post the general meeting directory on the web unless it is safeguarded. Before posting meeting newsletters or other materials, check to see if they contain personal information.
- Design: Avoid looking quaint. This reinforces the image of Friends as people who dress funny, talk funny, and keep to themselves. It's important that meetings project themselves as contemporary houses of worship, not a historical society. No Quaker bonnets!
- Does the site depict only white middle-class people?
- Content for inquirers: When explaining Quakerism, it needs to be written so that someone who knows nothing about Quakers will understand. Simple language that avoids Quaker jargon (such as "First Day School") is important.

Design considerations for the webmaster

- Does your web page load on lower-end computers in a reasonable period of time? Graphics-intensive pages can take a long time to appear on screen unless the graphic formats have been carefully chosen for quick upload.
- Is there sufficient contrast between text and background to make the text easy to read, including for people with vision challenges?
- Is the text large enough to read easily on a variety of screens?
- Are links labeled clearly?
- Are links large enough for mouse-challenged people to click on?
- The title you designate that is displayed at the top of the browser window is what is displayed on someone's bookmark list. Use something short and descriptive like "Broadview Quaker Meeting" rather than "Welcome".

Sensible precautions

In addition to the webmaster, others in the meeting should have a record of where the website is hosted, passwords, how to renew the registration, and any other information necessary to work on the site. There are stories of meetings that have lost access to their website when the webmaster died or departed. Unfortunately, that old site remains on the web, getting more and more out of date.

As with any computer files, backups should be made and stored in a safe place – or several places, to be even more safe.

Publicizing your site

After the site is up and running you'll want to spread the word so that others can find it.

- You may want to print bookmarks or flyers featuring the web address to distribute within your meeting and to give to newcomers
- Announce the new site and its address in your newsletter
- Notify your quarterly and yearly meeting
- Send your information to: QuakerFinder (www.QuakerFinder.org); FWCC's meeting directory (www.fwccamericas.org/meetingsearch.aspx); and the quaker.org website (www.quaker.org/meetings.html)

Help internet users get to your site

To find something on the web, users do a search. The search engine returns a list of sites in its index that match one or more of the search words. Useful words and phrases to include in the title and/or text of your site's main page include:

- Quaker
- Religious Society of Friends
- The city and state your meeting is located in

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Website Checklist

- ___ The site has a contemporary look (no Quaker bonnets)
- ___ Content for inquirers is written simply and avoids Quaker jargon and acronyms
- ___ The web page loads reasonably quickly on lower-end computers
- ___ There is sufficient contrast between text and background
- ___ The text is large enough to read easily on a variety of screens
- ___ Navigation links are labeled clearly and are large enough
- ___ The home page's title is appropriate for a bookmark

The home page includes:

- ___ How to get to meeting for worship: street address, directions & a map, time, and day
- ___ How to contact a real live Friend with questions

The website includes:

- A brief description of the style of worship
- Arrangements for children
- Links to other Quaker websites