

Creating & Maintaining a Meeting Web Site



This pamphlet offers a series of Queries and Advices to help a Quaker meeting decide whether to set up a web site, what to include, and how to do it. It can also be helpful to a meeting considering various issues around a web presence or considering a redesign of their web site.

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- Are you going to include information that will become outdated?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?
- What do you need to do first to create a web site?
- 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 web master
- Publicizing your site
- Helping internet users get to your site

Introduction

Does this sound familiar? Some Friends have suggested that your meeting should have a web site; others are not so sure. You're not sure anyone in the group has the technical know-how to carry it off. Are there costs? How much work would it be to create? How much work would it be to maintain? Does the burden have to fall all on one person? What if that person is unable to continue?

These are all good questions. This document tries to give you some information, a starting place for discussion, and specific suggestions.

First, of course, the meeting needs to decide whether it would like a web site. Here are some things to consider, or, in proper Quaker style, Queries.

Queries

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

A web site 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
- Annual meeting calendar with times, dates, and directions
- 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Do you include information that will become outdated?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. Another reason for a static site (where specific dates are not included) is that after it is set up, the Friends who worked on it are free to put their energy back into the meeting.

What are the practical options for getting a web site set up?

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

- Find someone in the meeting who is willing and able to set up a standard web site based on HTML (HyperText Markup Language), the standard coding used for web sites worldwide. This can be done using a number of software programs such as Dreamweaver that generate HTML or by directly coding HTML in a text editor such as Notepad. When the time comes for someone else to take over as webmaster, the HTML code can be imported into another software program easily.

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 web sites for a fee
- Find someone in the meeting who is willing and able to set up a web site using free software from WordPress. This software, though originally designed for setting up a blog, is also able to generate web pages, and you don't have to use the blogging feature. 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.
 - 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 web site 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 web site or contact an appropriate committee.
 - As of this writing in July of 2012, FGC is about to roll out a low-cost service with hosting, templates, and easy input. Special modules have been developed for Friends to store minutes and for a meeting directory. Robust help will be available.

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

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

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

There are also short pieces of text explaining Quakerism that you can link to. (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. Asking permission to link to another site is polite but is not considered

necessary unless you are linking to material that does not clearly indicate who the owner or originator of the content is, as sometimes happens several layers deep in a site.)

There are various materials for newcomers on FGC's Outreach page at www.fgcquaker.org/deepen/outreach. There are also additional materials on sites that can be found through www.quaker.org.

What do you need to know about web sites?

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. One option is to “rent” hosting space from a commercial service for a monthly or yearly fee. Currently (2012), a very generous American Quaker maintains a huge set of web sites for Quaker organizations at www.quaker.org. There is information on the site on how to contact him and request him to host your site.

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 can provide you with a URL that starts with their web address but includes additional characters. 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. In addition to a one-time registration fee of \$5 to \$35, you will have to pay an annual charge, currently about \$15 to \$25, 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 web site

If your meeting decides to go ahead with the idea of creating a web site, 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 web site and submit it for Friends' comments and approval than for the entire meeting to try to design one. 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 web site 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 web master can flesh out the design, 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 web master 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 web master, 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 web master 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 web master in touch with the wishes of the meeting and spreads the responsibility for maintaining the site. The web master 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

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 up-coming 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 meeting house
- Links to: your yearly meeting’s web site; any Quaker organization the yearly meeting is affiliated with (FGC’s web address is www.fgcquaker.org); FGC’s web site for finding Quaker meetings (www.QuakerFinder.org); a Quaker web site 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. 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 web master

- 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?
- 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 web site 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 web site 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 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)

Helping 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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Web Site 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 web site includes:

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