

## **The Meetinghouse: Buy? Rent? Other?**

Excerpts compiled by *Western Friend Online* (2016)

---

### **Quotations Concerning:**

## **The Meetinghouse: Buy? Rent? Other?**

A Friends meetinghouse is a meetinghouse of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), where meeting for worship is usually held. Typically Friends meeting houses do not have steeples.

Quakers do not believe that meeting for worship should occur in any special place. They believe that "where two or three meet together in my name, I am there among them" (Revised English Bible, Matthew, Ch 18, v 20). Therefore meeting for worship may take place in any place. Early Quakers often met for worship outdoors or in local public buildings. However, when the Religious Society of Friends began to grow there became a need for buildings to house their meetings.

Quakers have always reserved the word church to mean the body of people who make up the worshipping community: Quakers do not use the word church to refer to the bricks and mortar of a worshipping community. George Fox, an early Quaker, spoke of places of worship that have steeples as steeple houses, and those that do not as meeting houses. This practice is shared by a number of other non-conformist Christian denominations, including Unitarians, Christadelphians, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Mennonites.

Some Friends meeting houses were adapted from existing structures, but most were purpose-built. Briggflatts Meeting House is an example of the latter. The hallmark of a meetinghouse is extreme simplicity and the absence of any liturgical symbols. More specifically, though, the defining characteristics of the Quaker meetinghouse are simplicity, equality, community, and peace. Though never explicitly written or spoken about, these tenets (or "Testimonies") of Quakerism were the basic, and only, guidelines for building a meetinghouse, as was seen through the continuity of the use of Testimonies within meetinghouse design. While meetinghouse design evolved over time to a standardization of the double-cell structure without explicit guidelines for building, the meetinghouse's reflective architecture revealed a deeper meaning. The meetinghouse design manifested and enhanced Quaker Testimonies and the cultivation of the Inner Light that was essential to Friends. Quakers easily moved from one place of meeting to another, but when given the opportunity to design and construct their own place of meeting, Friends infused their Testimonies in the planning, design, and construction of the building.

Meeting Houses built in a traditional style usually had two meeting rooms: one for the main meeting for worship, and another where the women's business meeting may be held (often referred to as the women's meeting room). Meeting houses of this style usually have a minister's gallery at one end of the meeting room, where traditionally those traveling in the ministry would have sat, with an elders bench immediately in front of this. Wooden

Excerpts compiled by *Western Friend Online* (2016)

---

benches facing this occupy the rest of the room, often with a gallery for extra seating. Meeting houses of this style usually have high windows so that worshippers sitting in meeting for worship cannot see outside.

Meeting houses built in a more modern design will usually consist of: a large meeting room, smaller rooms for committees, children's classes, etc., a kitchen and toilets.

The meeting room itself is a place for Friends to withdraw from the world. The windows are set sufficiently high that worshippers will not be distracted by the activities of the world's people outside, or in some cases they provide a view into the meeting house garden. The seating was originally long, hard and wooden. Today it is usually separate chairs but the layout remains the same — a square or rectangle facing inwards to a central table.

– Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends\\_meeting\\_house](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_meeting_house)

[Society] is not a *hotel* where we receive services in exchange for money, but a *home* to which we feel attached and whose history is (literally or adoptively) our own.

– Rabbi Jonathan Sax (2005)

We should like to see a greater unity between the religious service of our meetings and the social service of Friends, each being complementary to the other, since they are rooted in the same life and spirit; and to see this expressed in meeting houses which act as centers for varied activities of the surrounding neighborhood. . . Several of our meeting houses have been brought into increasing use in this way, greatly to the increase of the depth of the religious life of the meeting and of the sense of fellowship between its members.

– Social Service Investigating Committee  
London Yearly Meeting, (1944)

Oh, that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be in god only, may walk in the Light and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates! May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not. Holding treasures in the self-pleasing spirit is a stong plant, the fruit whereof ripens fast.

– John Woolman (circa 1764)

Excerpts compiled by *Western Friend Online* (2016)

---

We had not so much as heard of the people called Quakers till we heard of George Fox coming toward us, it may be when he was twenty miles off. He came on from Sedbergh, and . . . on to Swarthmoor. My dwellinghouse . . . being a place open to entertain ministers and religious people at, one of George Fox's friends brought him hither, where he stayed all night. And the next day . . . he went to Ulverton Steeple-house . . . [where he preached until the people] were so angry that one John Sawrey who was a Justice caused George Fox to be haled out. . . .

He came to our house again that night. . . And after supper my husband was sitting in the parlor, and I asked him if George Fox might come in, and he said, yes. So George came in without any compliment, and walked into the room, and began to speak presently; and the family and James Nayler, and Richard Farnsworth all came in: and he spoke very excellently, as ever I heard him; and opened Christ and the Apostles' practices, which they were in, in their day. . .

[The next morning], at our house diverse Friends were speaking one to another, how there was several convinced hereaways, and we could not tell where to get a Meeting. My husband also being present, he overheard, and said of his own accord, "You may meet here, if you will." Ant that was the first Meeting we had, that day he offered of his own accord. And then notice was given that day and the next to Friends, and there was a good large Meeting that First-day, which was the first Meeting that was at Swarthmoor; and so continued there a Meeting from 1652, till 1690.

– Margaret Fell (circa 1710)