

Notes:

The Meetinghouse: Buy? Rent? Other?

Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 9/14/2016

Participants:

- James Farmer Bloomington Meeting (Bloomington, IN)
- Don Goldstein Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Mary Klein Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Nichoe Lichen South Santa Fe Meeting (Santa Fe, NM)
- John McCarthy Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Kitty Mizuno Live Oak Meeting (Salinas, CA)
- Rick Seifert Multnomah Meeting (Portland, OR)
- Rebecca Senoglu Chico Meeting (Chico, CA)
- Larry Spears Duluth Meeting (Duluth, MN)

The following notes incorporate ideas shared orally during the online conversation and ideas shared in writing during the conversation through notes in the “chat” box. Thanks to Charlene Weir and John McCarthy for taking notes.

Thematic Summary by the Note-Taker:

Working through deliberations about where to mee can be transformative for the meeting, in either a positive or negative way. The following principles seemed to emerge as helpful:

- Striving to create a space that is open, inviting, accessible – “All are welcome”
- Positive links to the community and neighborhood
- A process led by the Spirit
- Consideration of how it impacts the meeting – does it revitalize the meeting or does it pull the meeting apart?
- Simplicity testimony guiding deliberation
- A commitment to the future and to the children
- Preserve our resources and our energy for what is important Quaker actions

Introductions; where the different meetings stand regarding their meetinghouses:

- Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA) has not owned any property. Began considering purchase of property round 2000, but it did not come to fruition. Currently, they have an adequate place in a school, but the question remains open.

- South Santa Fe Meeting purchased a meetinghouse recently, which required extensive remodeling. They are enjoying having their own meetinghouse.
- Chico Meeting purchased a small meetinghouse about eight years ago.
- Multnomah Meeting in Portland, OR, did a major expansion of their meetinghouse several years ago, and since then, their meeting has grown.
- Duluth Meeting just retired the mortgage. They are feeling some tension between caring for the meetinghouse versus putting energies in other priorities.
- Bloomington Friends Meeting is considering redesigning an old meetinghouse.

Questions introduced for the discussion:**Set One**

- What is the range of views in your meeting about the importance of the physical location where you meet for worship?
- How do Friends see themselves as stewards of public property? How do Friends see themselves as lilies of the field?
- What other views do Friends hold?

Set Two

- How has your meeting handled transitions between different types of meeting spaces?
- For example – deciding to begin renting a public property together, or deciding to buy a property, or deciding to renovate a property, or deciding to move?
- What practices helped you maintain love and kindness among yourselves while you found your way through these difficult decisions?

Discussion:

- The strongest arguments for owning a building are the ideas that a meetinghouse would strengthen the meeting and that it would evangelize other people to come to the meeting. We haven't actually seen this happen.
- Owning property sometimes becomes an option because of circumstances, such as when the meeting has to move from one rented place to another and an option appears that meets the meeting's needs with very little added financial burden. The internal meeting process often occurs more slowly than the speed required for purchasing property. In our case, a building became available that was going to move quickly. Several members of the meeting decided to carry the financial burden of ownership for five years, while the whole meeting comes to clarity. Eventually, we developed a strong sense that God wanted us to move in the direction of buying the property. One stood aside, but we didn't lose anyone in the decision. A few have drifted away because of the additional responsibilities of caring for a meeting. Advantages of having our own place

include: being able to meet during the week for worship and for committees, and being more visible in the community. The meeting was able to purchase the meetinghouse from the holding group in three years.

- Be careful about thinking of your meetinghouse as a source of rental income. It doesn't always work that way. For us, our goal was to make our meetinghouse a place that like-minded groups could use. This has increased our visible presence in the community. It may or may not grow the number of people in our meeting.
- We decided to spend \$500,000 to remodeled our building. The decision was hard, but the idea that carried the day was that we needed to do this for our children. We all got to know each other in a new way throughout the whole process. The meeting as a whole cleaned up the construction site for about five months months. That effort created a huge sense of ownership for all of us. The meeting as a whole also did the finishing work on the building together, and the result was beautiful.
- Renting to others spreads the message of Quakers by sharing our beautiful building. They see the simplicity of it. That we sit in a circle. By renting, we have gained a few new members who loved our meetinghouse. In some cases, the meetinghouse has become known as a "community house." A beautiful space draws people and speaks for Quakers.
- Our meeting has been renting space in a secondary school for over ten years. The problem is that you cannot control your space, and you cannot use it when you want to. You have to set up and tear down after every meeting. The cost of the rent can be high. We became aware of a building that used to be a religious space and seemed like it might be a good property to purchase. To be able to afford it, we would have needed to rent out some of the space to other organizations. Also, it was a hundred-year-old building that would have required a lot of attention. We considered this purchase for five months. The discussions seemed to focused on concerns about all the work required – the initial effort in renting the building, on-going maintenance, and general financial concerns. The strong concerns of a few Friends kept us from moving forward. At the same time, we hold a designated fund has been established to buy a meetinghouse, so we would be betraying trust if we use that money for something else. We are the largest monthly meeting in our yearly meeting that doesn't own its meetinghouse.
- We've been using a space in a local charter school for about six years, which we are able to do because one of our members provides services to the school in exchange for our using their space. Recently, the school's principal suddenly told us that we would not be able to continue meeting there. We actually found that this created energy in our meeting – imagining the alternatives. We have been meeting in the same school for many years, and for a while, it seemed as though we would have to find a new location. It was good to think about how we might all support our presence in a new space (one individual has had the primary responsibility for our meeting space for many years. It was also good to consider different towns as possible meeting places, as our membership is spread out over a wide geographic area. We did some research about

other possible sites to meet, and it has been a gift that we have had to reach out to other religious denominations in our area. Although it is nice to feel settled down, it is also nice to feel energized by looking at new places.

- Cooperation between different religious groups who meet on different days is promising and perhaps enriching.
- There is a young Friend in my meeting who is frustrated by all the time we put into our property (and into committee work). He asks us why are we not spending that time focusing on spiritual transformation.
- After we bought our new building, got pulled into conversations about raising more money to fix the place up. It was a real drain. We finally decided that the priority is not the place, the priority is the spirit of the meeting. We decided to live with the building as it is and focus on other issues. We have so much more than we realize. We need to be grateful for what we have.
- There are very diverse and often strong views within our meeting about whether to purchase a building or not. We have a committee that was created to include that diversity of views. The committee's clerk found it difficult to get the group to come together and eventually left the committee, and has even left the meeting. Committees like this do need to include a broad range of views, but discernment is also needed to identify people for the committee who are people open to leadings of the spirit and open to changing their minds.
- Considerations about space should start with what we *do* in the space. In our case, our decision was based on the realization that we were short-changing our children – and their families spoke up. Our expansion was for our future; it was for a legacy that we are passing on to the next generation. Without improving our meetinghouse, we might have lost the children. There was plenty of disagreement until we framed it that way. These are not sterile places that we are buying or renting – these are places that allow us to live out our callings. We need to hold all of that in the Light when we make these considerations.
- Our previous space was an older building that was too small to house the children and was not accessible for people with disabilities.
- We had a member who inherited some money and paid about \$125,000 for five years of pre-paid rent on a large, sunny space for us to meet in. That gave us time to hold long-range planning meetings to figure out our approach to stewardship. We established values for the place we were looking for. We had \$140,000 to purchase a building with. We decided that simplicity was a key value. We also wanted to find a place that was on the bus line, easy access. We also wanted a place that was easy to maintain. Buying or renting was a secondary considerations. We got to the point where we had four months to go. We searched and searched. When driving around, we found an older house in a Hispanic neighborhood. We bought it cheaply, and had to upgrade it to meet city codes. Although it was stressful, we worked together to do the

massive remodel. We have run out of money for some things like the flooring. The chairs don't match, which we decided is actually a message we want to send to visitors.. We found that the five years when we had rent-free space, actually led to some lack of support of the meeting by members. Also, we found it hard to get financing. At this point, we are not debt free. It really was a leap of Spirit that took hold of us when we decided to purchase this building. We have grown a lot because of taking that leap – and it was important that we did not take a leap that was too big. We were all just incredibly united. At first, we felt alarmed. But, now, we feel very rich. Our meetinghouse is just the right size for us to grow. Because we are now on a fairly busy street, we have gotten a fair number of new attenders and have been able to grow. We have room for children.

- Our meeting is across the street from an old public school that is now public housing. We have created a “little free library” and are now considering creating a “little free pantry.”
- It's important to look at your meetinghouse with newcomer eyes. See what is welcoming and what is not welcoming.