

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

*For Overseers, Ministry and Counsel,
and others who provide pastoral care
in unprogrammed Friends meetings*

Vol. 8, No. 2 • January 2001

The Challenge and Opportunity of Meetinghouse Changes

by Barry Zalph

Considering changes to a meeting's physical home will likely cause both excitement and anxiety within the meeting. This holds true whether the meeting faces buying its first meetinghouse, renovating or expanding its current building, moving to a different site, or laying down property ownership. The meeting's pastoral care committee, for example its "Oversight Committee," can help members and attenders view the transition as a series of opportunities to clarify the meeting's mission, support that mission, and grow together as a spiritual community.

The Oversight Committee can help the meeting follow the Spirit's guidance from the first considerations of a change through the adaptation to a new space (or the abandonment of proposals to change the meeting's home). Usually, the meeting names a building planning committee to weigh architectural and financial issues. The Oversight Committee focuses on different questions: Do Friends approach meetinghouse issues in an attitude of humility and openness? Do Friends' words and actions reflect patience and faith that way will open? Do relationships among Friends testify to an understanding that the house and grounds exist to support the spiritual fellowship,

and not vice versa? By gently reminding Friends of these (and similar) queries, the Oversight Committee can spiritually enrich the meeting throughout a potentially long and arduous process. Attention to these spiritual issues can indeed replace a sense of arduousness with one of joy and community vitality.

The Meetinghouse: Why do we need it? Why do we want to change it?

The incentive to move or change a meeting's home often comes from dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of its current home: excessive costs, inadequate space, poor accessibility for mobility-impaired Friends, etc. Rather than hurrying to solve the apparent problem, we often benefit by framing the issue more broadly. How to house the meeting and how much to spend on physical facilities may distract us from the question, "What does the Spirit call us to do?"

We may want to be all things to all seekers, and make unrealistic demands of ourselves and our meetinghouse in the process. Deliberations over the future of the meetinghouse provide a meeting with an important chance to examine its mission and gain new clarity and unity. In turn, clarity about mission will greatly facilitate decisions about the property changes that may be needed.



Barry Zalph

Published by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Working Group on Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members

Many building projects come about to make room for growth in First Day attendance, yet we often have only vague ideas about whom we seek as new attenders. Do we intend to reach out to people of color, families with children, people with disabilities, others? How will we accommodate newcomers when they appear? A good meeting-house location and design can remove barriers to newcomers who might attend the meeting and can help them feel at home when they arrive. Even so,

our attitudes and behavior towards newcomers will play a larger role in their eventual decision to join us or to move on.

If a meeting already has a meetinghouse, long-time meeting participants probably have many good associations with it. For some, this building represents the first place they truly felt at home in a religious group. For others there is a sentimental attachment to the room in which they were married or where their parent's memorial service was held.

One Meeting's Experience: New Meetinghouse for St. Louis Meeting

St. Louis Meeting may not be a textbook case of how to proceed on nurturing the meeting through making a change in the meetinghouse. It took a long time, with going down some blind alleys, and now that we're moved we are faced with high mortgage payments and expensive repairs. But we have come through it intact as a meeting and with a sense of rightness to where we have ended up. We love our new meetinghouse. It is a wonderful place.

Our meeting is relatively young, it was founded a little over 60 years ago. For forty years we worshipped in a small church building in a suburban neighborhood. We liked it there. But it had become too small. When we explored remodeling our First Day School space it turned out not to meet the building code and we were ordered to stop using it. We had to do *something*.

Early on we put up big sheets of paper in the meeting asking members to write "What you like about where we are now," "What you don't like about where we are now," and "What you hope for in a new meetinghouse." We had threshing sessions and an open meeting with an architect to talk about what we really cared about. We were clear that we wanted a serene, simple place for adult worship, green outdoor space, and good space for the children. We wanted to buy an existing building, and we preferred staying in the suburbs.

Things did not fall in place. We didn't find any churches for sale that we could afford in the suburban areas where we were looking. We had an offer of land and considered again whether to build, but things didn't fall in place for that either. Time went on. We seemed to bounce from one thing to another. Some older, long time members were reluctant to move. One confided that she was not sure she could adjust to a new place. As impatience and frustration became obvious, we widened the search to a broader

geographical area including inside the city of St. Louis.

Then somebody found a building in the city on the border between a gentrifying neighborhood and low income housing projects. The first people who visited it fell in love with it. They brought some more people who fell in love. It had good space for First Day School and a library and beautiful worship space. BUT the price was too high. The purchase price was more than the total purchase and remodeling amount recommended by the Finance Committee. In our meetings for business people said "This is the space we need." "Way will open." "We'll manage it." Some members of the Finance Committee were doubtful.

There were several meetings. There were called meetings. There were people calling for no more called meetings. There were times when we were not our best selves. Often when we were losing track someone would remind us that it is not important how this turns out; it is important how we treat each other, that we all still need to be friends when this is over. We didn't remember it all the time – just often enough so we didn't completely lose sight of these principles.

We followed our hearts instead of the Finance Committee's minds. We came to clarity to buy the building in the city. Three people stood aside from the decision, though all three supported the decision after it was made.

It hasn't been easy since then. We had to do a lot of the renovations with our volunteer labor. The costs are very high. Yet somehow we always have enough money to pay our bills.

In the struggle to find a place and set it up we had let go of many of the activities that are the core of the life of the meeting. We're getting back to being a meeting again. There is new vitality. As the tension and stress is released we have energy to greet newcomers and get to know them and draw them in.

*Based on interview with Margaret Katranides
Clerk of St. Louis Meeting*

The prospect of moving to a new location or dramatically altering the feel of this building often causes not only grief but active resistance. The details of proposed changes and their many advantages have little influence on this resistance. Oversight Committee members can help the meeting by respecting these feelings and drawing them out. (See "Roles for the Oversight Committee," below.) By strengthening the bonds among individuals and between each individual and the meeting, we can reassure Friends that the meeting will remain their spiritual community after any move or change.

Whether Friends feel strongly attached to changing the property or to keeping it the same, we each face the spiritual risk of seeing it as "my meeting." If we relinquish our sense of ownership, we can see ourselves as a body of seekers drawn together by and accountable to the Divine. In this attitude, we can accept the possibility of changes that might disconcert us but will serve a holy purpose of which we have only a dim awareness. Seeing the meeting and its property as a Divine trust helps to free us from squabbles over personal preferences and to open us to wise stewardship of our resources under the Spirit's guidance.

Financial Issues

To build, buy, renovate, or expand a meeting-house usually involves expenses far beyond the meeting's normal operating budget. Consultant and author, Peter Steinke, notes money as one of the issues most commonly involved in congregational conflict. Steinke's books and the Mennonite Conciliation Service *Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual* (see Resources) provide many insights into how spiritual communities can deal gracefully with potentially divisive issues, including those involving money and property.

Decades of familial and cultural conditioning and personal experiences have formed in each of us deeply ingrained attitudes toward money. These attitudes vary dramatically from person to person. This explains in part why money acts as such a flash point in many group decisions. The Oversight Committee can help Friends appreciate their differences in attitude and approach one another charitably in the midst of financial disagreements. Working through our differences gives us opportunities to know each other better and to build friendships that transcend the need for similarity of beliefs. (This can come in handy in other aspects of the life of the meeting!)

Resources on Meeting Property

Readings:

- Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, especially pp. 61-72, "The Meeting As Covenant Community" by Lloyd Lee Wilson, Pendle Hill Publications, 1993. *#
- A Friendly Meeting Place*, by Kenneth Ives, Progressiv Publishr, 1988. *#
- How To Care For Religious Properties* by Michael Lynch, Preservation League of New York State, 1982. #
- A Meeting Home*, by Margaret Springer, Argenta BC, Argenta Friends Press, 1989. (Canadian Quaker pamphlet 31) A small monthly meeting's journey toward its first meetinghouse. #
- Mediation and Facilitation Training Manual*, especially Ch. 6, "Conflict in Groups." Mennonite Conciliation Service, Mennonite Central Committee, 1995.
- The Healthy Congregation*, by Peter Steinke, Alban Institute, 1996.
- How Your Church Family Works*, by Peter Steinke, Alban Institute, 1993.
- Reducing Energy Costs In Religious Buildings: A Workbook For Congregation Leaders*. Written for the Philadelphia Electric Company by the Interfaith Coalition on Energy. Philadelphia, 1992? #

Sources of funding and advice:

- Friends Meetinghouse Fund, 1217 Arch Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107 Contact Ken Miller (215)567-1700.
- Friends Extension Corporation, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, IN, 47374 Contact Margaret Schmidt (765)962-7573.
- Meetinghouse Trust Funds, 320 Arch Street, Philadelphia PA 19106 Contact Helen File, (215)627-2667.
- Bequest Funds for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 Contact Carol Walz (215)241-7201.

* Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.
 #Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Membership in the library is open to Friends outside PYM.

Friends often feel reluctant to "spend money on ourselves." We may feel proud of our meeting's devoting well over half of its budget to charitable giving and advocacy efforts. Considering a major capital expenditure often raises questions about the "selfishness" of such spending. Honest examination can reveal whether an expensive building project would compete with or facilitate the well-discerned work of the meeting. Carefully and prayerfully

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Examine the need or leading to change the status quo. What do we hope to accomplish by changing the meeting space? How can we come to know if we are so led?

Consider the meeting's cherished features and its inadequacies. Envision the meeting maintaining its current virtues while improving on its current weaknesses. Identify how changes in the property could foster the desired improvements.

Identify misgivings and resistance to change (or resistance to participating in the discussion of prospective change). Provide safe space for individuals to explore and express their negative thoughts and feelings. Help the meeting to respect minority voices, which often make a crucial contribution to discerning truth. Give Friends private opportunities to tell their stories and share their misgivings. Then, encourage them to participate in the group discussions. Discourage people from presenting their misgivings by proxy, as this creates many chances for miscommunication and undermines group discernment. (Of course, it is appropriate to make allowances for someone who cannot participate in person due to illness, disability, or other unalterable circumstance.)

Resistance to participating in a discussion of options may indicate a sense of disempowerment ("It doesn't matter what I say, *they'll* just go ahead and decide what *they* want anyway") or alienation ("This isn't really my meeting, so I shouldn't stick my nose in"). It could also stem from bad associations with past moves, whether involving family, work, or church. Personal invitations may help bring these Friends into the discussions. Stay alert to interpersonal tensions that may have a bearing on a person's or group's unwillingness to take part. Address these tensions separately from the meetinghouse discussions. Unresolved interpersonal grievances can avalanche as disaffected individuals stay aloof from the deliberations until the eleventh hour and then seek to veto a plan that they associate with their antagonist(s).

Open the floodgates for visions, big and small, of how to make the meeting more like the envisioned ideal. In the early phase, Friends should feel encouraged to bring forth all attractive ideas, independent of their apparent practicality. Ideas need not assume a change in the building. For example, a meeting facing overcrowding during First Day worship might consider holding two meetings for worship each week rather than moving to a larger space.

Exploring and Choosing Among Property Options

Winnow the options. Usually this involves a building planning committee. The committee arranges a number of opportunities for Friends to question and comment on the many suggestions, and to discern the key attributes of the meeting's new or expanded home. The committee then fleshes out the most promising ideas, and considers their (roughly estimated) costs and benefits. This is not yet the time to hire an architect to prepare drawings or otherwise commit financial resources to any one option.

Committee meetings should be open.

The committee will probably choose to schedule a series of large-group meetings to present particular options and receive feedback from anyone in the meeting community. This stage culminates in the committee bringing to meeting for business a handful of options, any one of which the committee feels would serve the meeting well. It is, of course, possible that the committee will unite in recommending a particular plan. In this instance, the committee must take special care to stay open to the discernment of the meeting for business, which may not find unity with the committee's favored proposal.

Discern. Wait upon the Lord. Don't rush. Do not let the time pressures of the real estate market drive your process. If the meeting minds the Light, external circumstances will fall into place to enable the meeting to do as the Spirit leads. The discernment phase will probably take a period of months. During this time, the meeting will probably decide to seek architectural and financial details about one or more of the proposed options. Usually, the building planning committee will remain active during this phase.

Act. Taking care of the myriad details of a building project (whether moving, renovating, or building) requires good organizational skills and consistent diligence. Consider the possibility of laying down the committee that led the search process and naming another committee to implement the project. Even if the people on the former committee have the skills to oversee implementation, it may be time to give them a well-earned rest and give others a chance to play a major role. It serves the meeting best if the project is always seen as a collective effort and not mainly the initiative of one or a few Friends.

Reflect. How do we use this new space to best serve the Divine? Help the meeting redirect its focus from the physical and financial issues of a building to the interpersonal and spiritual issues that determine the health of a spiritual community.

considering the mission of the meeting, and how a change in the facility might support that mission, will help the meeting to gain clarity on the expenditures required by a proposed building project.

Whether the meeting can raise the funds needed for the proposed purchase or renovation is only the tip of the iceberg of financial concerns. The meeting, under the guidance of the building committee, should also weigh the long-term balance of likely income and expenses (including the meeting's charitable giving) after completing the building project. Financing, legal issues, and many other practical matters are discussed in *A Friendly Meeting Place*. (See Resources, page 3).

Roles for the Oversight Committee

Several matters deserve the attention of the Oversight Committee throughout the process:

Help Friends stay patient and realistic. Three times in fifteen years Rochester (NY) Friends Meeting considered moving, each time deciding that the benefits of staying put outweighed the disadvantages. After another 15 years, the meeting again considered moving and reached clarity to do so. Even then, the planning, acquisition, and renovation of their new meetinghouse took six years. (See "Rochester Friends' New Meeting House, *FGConnections*, Fall 1999.)

See to the openness and inclusiveness of every element of the process. Communicate to a fault. Give everyone (including infrequent attenders) multiple opportunities to learn about every committee meeting, threshing session, etc. Actively solicit participation, rather than leaving it to individual initiative. Seek to ensure that the process does not inadvertently exclude or marginalize any group (e.g., young adults, people who work on weeknights, people not fond of intellectual debates, etc.). Encourage less-vocal Friends to speak and more-vocal Friends to listen.

Help Friends recognize the value of both rational analysis and spiritual discernment. Neither by itself will likely lead to good decisions about a meeting-house. Help Friends grow in appreciation of each others' complementary gifts of analysis and spiritual receptiveness, rather than seeking to homogenize the meeting into one or the other approach.

As Friends direct attention to the building, we sometimes lose sight of ourselves. Sometimes we imagine ourselves in an unrealistically favorable light. Conversely, sometimes we underestimate skills and gifts at our disposal. The Oversight Committee can serve as a spiritual mirror. Perhaps the plans for greatly expanded First Day school space call for an

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Of Interest...

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE ON CARING FOR THE TERMINALLY ILL

After the last issue of *PCN* was published we learned of another resource on visiting those who are seriously ill. In *Visiting Mom: An unexpected gift*, (Elder Press 2000), author Sherry M. Bell writes of her experiences in visiting her mother who had Alzheimer's. Her thoughtful suggestions and insights are applicable to visiting others who are seriously ill but don't have Alzheimer's.

COUPLE ENRICHMENT RETREATS

Meetings can support the marriages under their care by encouraging participation in a couple enrichment retreat. This program sponsored by Friends General Conference in collaboration with its affiliated yearly meetings has served hundreds of couples over the past 30 years. The retreats help couples deepen and strengthen their relationships in the face of all the pressures in our culture that seem to work against strong, sustaining marriages.

Retreat leaders are available to come to your area for a weekend retreat. A complete listing of leader couples is available from FGC (215)561-1700 or www.fgcquaker.org.

examination of our chronic shortage of First Day school teachers. Perhaps the consistent participation of twenty Friends in meetinghouse planning events indicates that we need not fear a lack of volunteer commitment for the next phase of the work. In observing and reflecting the meeting's lapses in self-awareness, the Oversight Committee must maintain a humble and loving attitude. This is not a work of finding faults, but rather of noting opportunities for us all to grow in the Light.

In all of this, share your faith that the meeting is not alone in this work. As did ancient Friends, I have experienced the Spirit that draws us into unity and empowers us to follow our leadings, if only we attend to it. When we center in the Light, "way opens."

The Meetinghouse as Lightening Rod

Many meetings have experienced difficulties, or even grievous schisms, over property concerns. The related issues of mission, stewardship of resources, and inclusiveness call forth a wide range of thoughts and feelings. Conflict is an inevitable, and potentially constructive, result. Healthy meetings consider conflict as an opportunity to learn from one another and draw closer in the Spirit. They acknowledge conflicting viewpoints openly, and the people in disagreement continue to treat each other with love and respect. Apparent absence of disagreement (especially during the early stages of exploring and planning) usually means that someone is holding back from expressing a dissenting opinion. The books by Mennonite Conciliation Service and Steinke (listed under Resources, page 3) give excellent guidance on transforming conflict into opportunities for growth in the Spirit.

Beware of Friends looking to a building change as a panacea. Identify and address unresolved issues (e.g., racial homogeneity, inadequate hospitality to newcomers, poor planning for the needs of disabled members, etc.). Remind Friends that a physical move or change will not, by itself, fix the problems. Unless the meeting has worked in its current home to address the problems, an improvement in the facility or location is not likely to resolve them.

Building Community through a Building Project

The right meetinghouse can enrich the life of a meeting in many ways. Even apart from this end result, the *process* of coming to unity on and bringing to fruition a building project can deepen the spiritual fellowship of the meeting. The risks and rewards of a building project extend beyond the financial and physical to the spiritual realm. The prayers and diligent work of a meeting's Oversight Committee can help the meeting navigate the risks and reap the rewards of this transition in a meeting's life.

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Questions for Reflection

1. What is our pastoral care role in helping the meeting stay centered as we consider changes to our place of worship?
2. How can we contribute to keeping a proper balance between rational analysis and spiritual discernment?
3. What special role can we play in reaching out to those who hold minority opinions and may fear that their thoughts are irrelevant or unwelcome? What can we do to draw those on the margins of the deliberations more fully into the life of the meeting?
4. If tensions develop between individuals or groups in the meeting, how can we facilitate the healthy resolution of those tensions?
5. How can we help Friends stay patient and not be rushed by the world's time?
6. When the decision is made and the change is complete, how can we help the Friends let go of the tensions of the process, settle into the new space, and open to new guidance for the life of the meeting?

Pastoral Care Newsletter is published quarterly by the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Concerns Group on Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members. Annette Bennert, clerk. Patricia McBee, editor. We are located at 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102. Comments are welcome. **Please do not duplicate without permission.** To obtain additional copies or to subscribe, contact Steve Gulick, at 215-241-7068 or steveg@pym.org.