

# The Notion of Providing a Screen-Free Meeting for Worship at Durham Friends

By Craig, March 10, 2024

## What's Meant by Screen-Free

To me, the word “screen” implies things left out. Whatever has been “screened” has been curated, culled, sorted through, like rocks or sand sifted through a screen. Only certain parts get through. To me the word “screen” also implies two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional. That what screens are; flat, without depth. Screens also have frames. When I look at something on a screen I am missing all the stuff that’s not in the frame. Someone has decided the frame for me. I can’t look at all that I want.

These days, screens are ridiculously popular. Almost everyone carries one in their pocket and they are on virtually every wall and in every car. They turn our attention from full-dimensional real life to curated, two-dimensional, framed pieces of life.

As Quakers we value the fullness of life and we value direct connection with the divine and with each other. So why should we embrace screens, especially in our Meeting for Worship?

The reason of course is access. We want to provide greater access to our Meeting. Yet the kind of access we’re talking about in that context seems to be quantity; the notion of allowing more people to participate. Yet what about quality of access. Screen absolutely obscures the quality of our access to the divine and to each other, in my opinion.

Can we have both? Can we increase the quality of the Meeting experience and also provide access to more people? I think we can.

## Vision

I have a vision for conducting screen-free Meeting for Worship every Sunday morning in the Meetinghouse; a time and place that one can count on no screens. No tech. A place to unwind and unplug. A place to let the eyes and the mind wander. A three-dimensional experience with no barriers between us and the divine and each other, and no distractions from the present place.

I also envision providing an opportunity for distant Friends to connect with local Friends via Zoom perhaps in the fellowship room after Meeting for Worship, or in a separate Meeting. I also know that distant Friends can join a host of other Zoom Quaker Meetings for Worship from around the world at a variety of times and days.

And of course we could use Zoom for committee meetings and all manner of business. But that Sunday morning Meeting for Worship at 10:30am; let that be sacred.

## Why

Our Meeting is losing members. I believe that if we don't do something different, perhaps radically different, we will continue to lose members and eventually die. Really.

A natural and logical way to distinguish ourselves and attract new members is to build on our unique assets: our spectacular Meetinghouse and our Quaker brand.

First, about the Meetinghouse. Anyone can offer a Zoom "church-like" experience. There are thousands of on-line opportunities for fellowship and spirituality. Thousands. And we don't do it particularly well. Young people especially are not inclined to join us remotely when they have so many other, better choices. New people don't tend to join us that way. New people tend to show up at our physical Meetinghouse.

The Meetinghouse is a special place and offers a unique experience. If we enhanced that experience – that place – by advertising it as a screen-free place, I think that would be attractive. "Come spend one hour a week with no screens. Leave your cellphone at the door. Step away from the busyness and madness of everyday modern life into a world of simplicity and distraction-free meditation." I think that would be attractive to 20-somethings, to 30-somethings, to 40-somethings, to families with young kids, to all kinds of people who know, in their hearts, that incessant screens are troublesome and not healthy.

Second, providing a screen-free worship experience is perfectly aligned with "the Quaker brand." Simplicity. Direct connection. Undistracted silence to hear the light within. Peace. I believe we could draw people to check out our Meeting – people who have just a passing or fleeting impression that "Quakerism is good" - and then learn more, and come back, and join us. Many people know that Quakers stand for peace. Now here we are offering you a place where you can find peace, every Sunday morning.

Piling on here: there is mounting evidence to suggest that people are seeking respite from screens. In Europe there are coffee houses and bars popping up that specifically advertise a screen free experience. (Here's an example: [https://www.instagram.com/theoffline\\_club/](https://www.instagram.com/theoffline_club/)). People don't just want an offline experience, people are also increasingly craving a sense of belonging. In a world where we are increasingly divided by social media and by our screens – where mental health is increasingly in jeopardy – people WANT to join with other people in real and authentic ways, but don't know how. My vision is for us – Durham Friends Meeting – to meet that demand and help people connect. This is an absolutely practical way that we can help people with their mental health; that we can support the world. Building on what it means to be a Quaker and making more full use of our Meetinghouse.

Here's another trend we can provide respite for. Growing distrust. Social media is a field of landmines of deceit and deception. Artificial intelligence and deep fake videos are going to make things worse. Way worse. People are wondering, "Who can I trust?" Online people - even videos of people on screens - are going to be increasingly fake. We can provide a place of trust and security. When you are in Quaker Meeting – in our Meetinghouse house looking around at your fellows or chatting over coffee after – you can let your guard down. You can

find peace and relax in this place of immediate and direct authenticity; with no certificates or passwords or two-factor authentication required. No wondering, who am I really connecting with?

## The Bigger Vision

I would like the Meetinghouse, our special place, to grow into being way more used by the community. It's a precious asset that could be used much more for the meetings of other groups, book clubs, fundraisers, concerts, recovery groups, child care, pickleball in the parking lot. Why not? Why keep it just to ourselves. The world needs gathering places. People need connection to each other. We can provide that!

I started going to the Meetinghouse because our cohousing group met there. I was not drawn to Quakerism, I was drawn to a functional building that provided a community service. Then I read the stuff on the walls and got drawn to Quakerism. This is how it works.

Let's draw people to our Meetinghouse with a unique screen-free Sunday morning experience and by hosting more community-serving activities, and then draw them into Quakerism just by virtue of exposure to who we are and the greater gifts we offer.

## What About Our Remote Friends?

If we go to a screen-free Sunday morning Meeting for Worship, what about Martha and Brown and Ruth and Margaret and others who participate regularly? Or even those who like to option of participating remotely once in a while?

This is a significant question. It's probably THE biggest barrier to the screen-free idea. First, we might ask these people to make an accommodation (a sacrifice even) so that our Meeting can grow. Even though it might be convenient to attend from home, would you mind driving down here or asking for a ride to get you here in person? How about we offer an alternative way for such people to participate remotely such as a Zoom Social Session each Sunday from 12:00 to 12:45, perhaps in what used to be the kids room. Further, we could set up a separate Zoom Meeting for Worship, say from 9:30am to 10:30am every Sunday morning; just on Zoom. We could also audio-stream our Meeting for Worship so remote people could listen in, but not affect what's happening in the room. Lastly, for the Friend who wants a remote Quaker Meeting experience, there are many other opportunities. We could simply provide links to other such resources – groups who do it way better than us, and carry the notion: that's not our thing.

Lastly, this is the hardest of all to say, a change such as this might result in a few people leaving our Meeting. If we're talking about one or two people, that's a sacrifice we should be willing to consider. When we decided to affirm that we were open to queer people, we lost a few members. We were willing to do that because "it was the right thing to do." In my work I have seen so many groups remain stagnant and even decline because they felt such a

strong need to accommodate one or two members. And because of that, they missed out on enormous potential.

## Conclusion

I think that the potential here is enormous. Yet I'm absolutely sure that I don't have it all figured out. At this point, it's just a leading. The idea needs discussion and discernment and needs to gain a critical mass of widespread enthusiasm. I'm simply planting the seed and I'm letting you know that I'm willing to work to make it happen. Thank you for considering.