

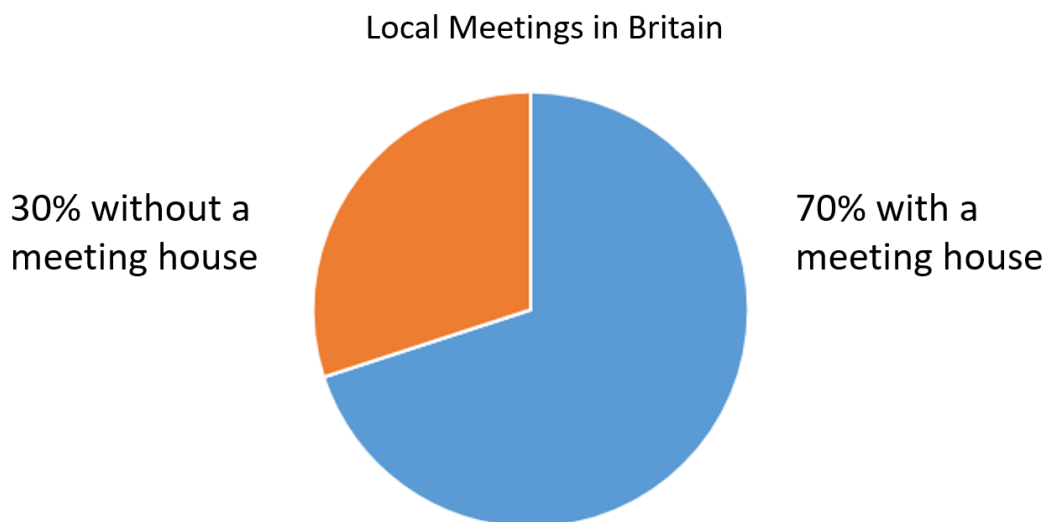


## Simpler Meetings Series

### Simpler ways without a meeting house

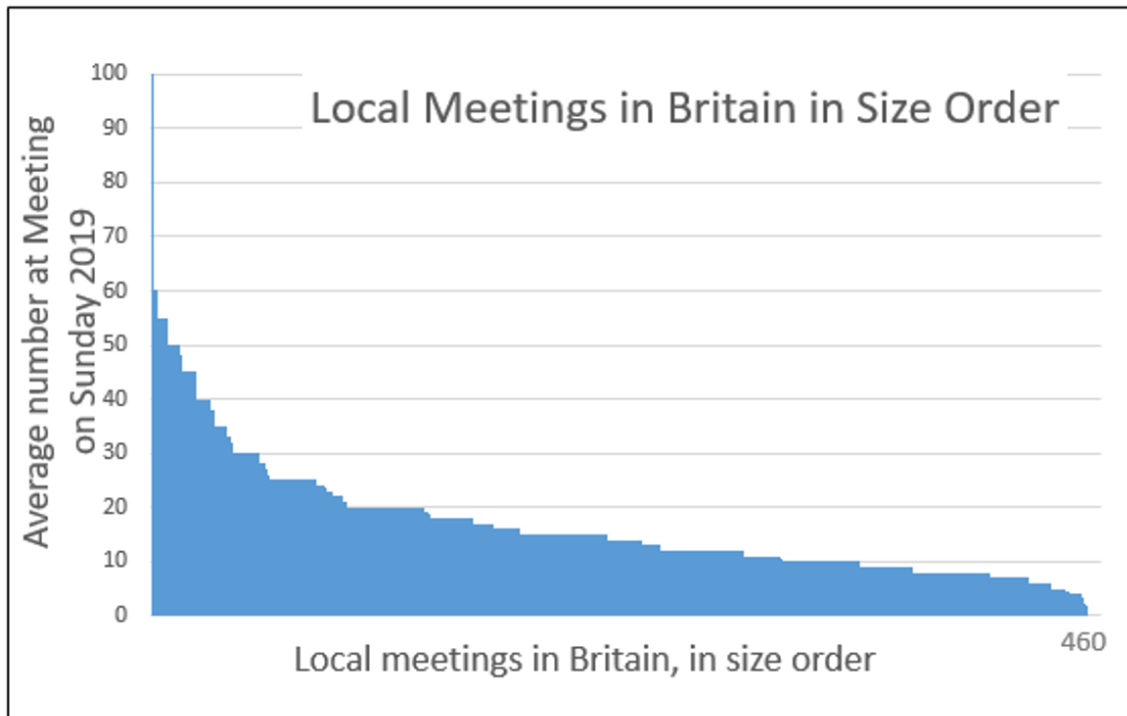
Hello Friends. I'm Jonathan Carmichael, I'm a Quaker from Watford meeting in Hertfordshire in the East of England. I'm going to share today a whole lot of things that I've been discovering about how meetings without meeting houses are doing things and thriving. It's based on work I've been doing for Britain Yearly Meeting, in the Simpler Meetings project, finding and sharing ways that meetings can be simpler to run.

Like a lot of Quakers, I used to think that meetings without meeting houses were the rare exception. I did a bit of digging, and was amazed to find that 30% of local meetings in Britain don't have a meeting house.

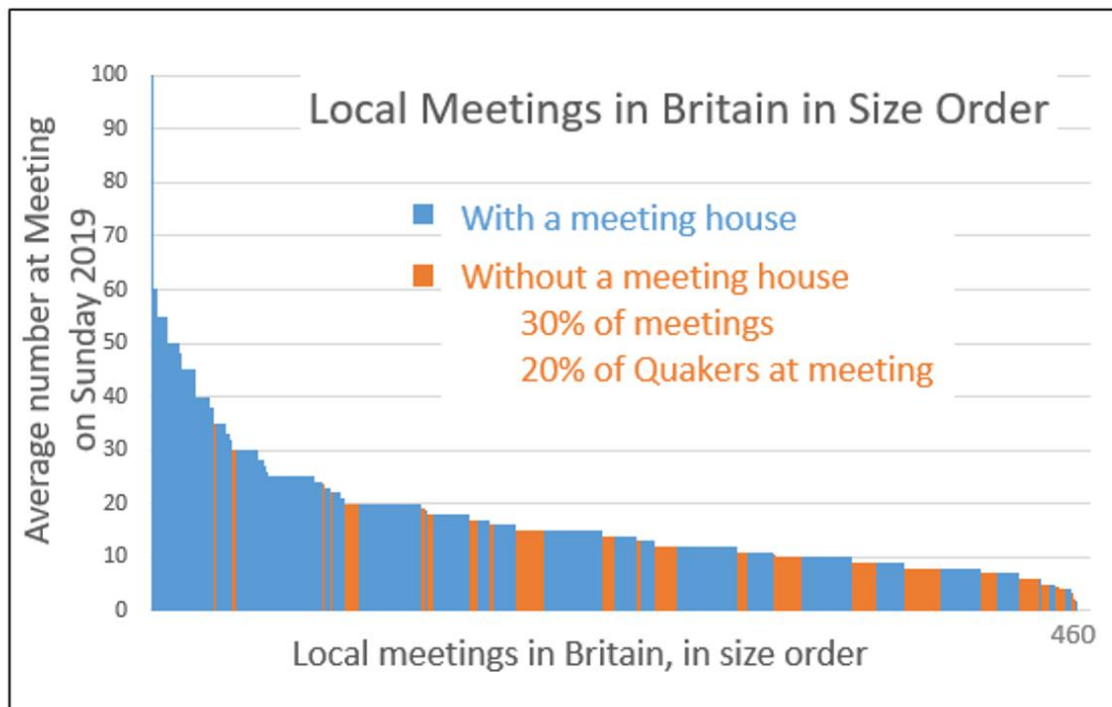


That's almost 1 in 3. So this is actually quite common. I might even say "quite normal"!

Here's a chart showing all the local meetings in Britain in size order, big ones on the left, smaller ones on the right.



And here are all the meetings without a meeting house, shown in orange:



You can see that they're spread out across the range of sizes. They're not just the small ones. There are lots of middle-sized meetings like this. And two are in the top 10%.

And if you look at this in terms of “bums on seats”, of all the Quakers at Sunday worship typically in 2019, 20% were not in a meeting house that they had to look after - 1 in 5.

And this isn't counting all the satellite meetings, or the midweek meetings, and the worshipping groups, that don't use a meeting house.

I sent out a questionnaire to all these local meetings without a meeting house, and how people responded forms the basis for this talk.

They said:

“This gives us more time for the spiritual and all things beyond ourselves.

“We do not have to spend time on dealing with buildings - the community centre takes care of that. This gives us more energy to spend on other aspects of our Quaker life.”

“We find that it gives us more time to share our stories and learn from one another's spiritual journeys.”

“We can devote our energies and resources to supporting shared concerns and witness.”

“One of the best things about not having a meeting house is that we find we have massively less business to conduct at our business meetings.”

They're not having a premises committee, not managing or supporting staff. There's much less for the treasurer to do, much less for trustees.

Others said:

“I think that proportionately, our local meeting has more people involved in Quaker activity beyond the local meeting than most larger meetings, or those with meeting houses.”

“Being so small, I think not owning a building makes the difference between surviving or not as a meeting.”

I asked in this questionnaire: **“What do you do to be visible in your community, and easy to find?”**

Lots of people said they had an A-frame notice board outside where they meet.

Someone from Bideford said: “We purchased a large promotional “feather” flag, to mark the entrance, and advertise our presence. It is blue with the Quaker logo and the words “Quakers: all are welcome”.

And I think their feather flag communicates a bit more: it communicates “modern, lively”.

Someone from Wimborne said: "We have a poster on the notice board of the community centre where we meet, and also on their website. We have occasional articles in the local free newspaper, written by a member of the meeting. Over the years I think this has actually been our most effective form of outreach."

Someone else from Wimborne said: "We have an on-screen advert in the local Post Office."

Meetings put posters in notice boards in their town centre, or in windows. They post in local social media groups, have displays in the library, have a big banner.

Beeston meeting uses stalls at local events, a blog, and a Facebook group.

Peckham and Plumstead said: "Most new people find us via the BYM website, and quite a few people have come to us that way."

From Loughborough: "Remarkably, four new attenders have come to meeting by seeing our website."

And people are using word of mouth:

"We tell people."

One meeting who meets in a sports centre is developing relationships with sports groups that they'd never normally cross paths with otherwise.

These are all things that any meeting can do. But perhaps not having a conventional notice board means you need to do other things more actively?

People sometimes say to me: **"That's all really well. But do people come to these meetings? Do they join?"**

Well, from the Tabular Statement, I looked at a list of all local meetings that have grown in membership by 50% or more since 2009 - so over 10 years. Of these "growing meetings" 3/4 of them don't have a meeting house!

I think that's quite important food for thought.

I asked in the questionnaire: **"What about having a sense of community, a sense of belonging?"**

Lots of the meetings talked about eating together: eating at their venue, eating in people's homes, picnics, in a cafe or a pub.

There was lots of talk of holding social events, and learning events, study groups, a monthly one-to-one spiritual sharing, or joining with another meeting for social and study groups.

Walking cropped up several times.

A couple of trips in a minibus, a Kindler's day, a Labyrinth Day.

One meeting have painted the entry foyer of the community building that they use. And the previous year they painted the kitchen - so they are doing an activity together for their venue.

Someone responded:

“A Quaker meeting is not defined by where it worships but by the people that make up its community.” I wonder whether not having a building means that you can concentrate on growing the community?

I asked: **“How do you get around a lack of storage space?”**

Someone from Swanage meeting replied: “Simplicity is the answer, and we only have what we need, with two small cupboards to store our essentials.”

At Burnham-on-Sea they have “A box of books for the table, a visitor's book and a recent mail. Another box with a carefully chosen library. And a third box of books and simple activities for children.”

From Portobello and Musselburgh: “We negotiated a good cupboard when we moved in!”

From Loughborough: “The landlord has allowed us to keep a cupboard in our room with integrated notice boards on the inside.”

Bideford meeting went a step further: “The management were happy for us to purchase a large cupboard as there was room for it. They were also happy for us to bring in some extra upright chairs.”

And if you have no storage at all, here's a neat way from Penarth meeting:

“Each person who lives near the centre of town (and anyone else who feels inclined) is asked to bring a basic bag of materials to meeting: Quaker faith & practice, Advices & Queries, a Bible, a few Gift Aid envelopes, some Quaker leaflets, and materials for use with the children - a pad of paper, pens pencils, one of the children's books, or materials for an activity.”

So this meeting always has what they need. And you could do that anywhere!

I asked: **“What do you do instead of a library?”**

Lots of meetings described having books in a cupboard, and displaying a few books each week.

Quite a few have their library kept at a Friend's house, with an online catalogue, or a printed list. And then you just ask, and the Friend brings in the book for you. Plus having a selection of books displayed, perhaps tying in with a theme on spiritual nurture or national events.

Sidmouth said they have a Quaker bookshelf where they meet.

Loughborough have a new purpose-built bookcase for their library.

Oakhampton keep their books in a folding bookcase on wheels.

Crewe and Nantwich have a mobile book trolley, tucked away when they're not there. They bring it out.

I hope this gives you some ideas.

I asked about **other tips**:

“Find a sympathetic landlord, with whom you can build an ongoing relationship.”

“Be friendly with the management.”

“Concentrate on the bare essentials - the only thing worth worrying about is our meeting for worship.”

From Lampeter: “We moved into town, where strangers could find us more easily. It's more accessible to public transport, and the venue we chose is fully accessible.”

From Oakhampton: “Our new location is more attractive to younger people.”

From Wimborne: “Much of the reason for starting a meeting here was to provide a venue for worship nearer where many Friends lived.”

From Stroud: “Actually, we don't seem to have to arrange lifts anymore - we are more easy to get to by bike and by bus and train and walking.”

From Burnham-on-Sea: “We can use another room in the building for children, and we pay retrospectively. We always have a few things to keep them amused, but if we know they're coming one of us brings things in.”

### Now, **where do Quakers meet?**

Lots of Quaker meetings use rooms in community centres or in village halls, or buildings of other religious groups - not necessarily the biggest room in the building.

There are Quaker meetings in museums, in civic buildings, and art centres, in sports centres, in charity offices, day centres, and in therapy centres. Quite a few are in primary or secondary schools, university buildings, a music school. There's a Quaker meeting using a room in a community fire station (presumably not on the days when they're running fire engines from there!). And another uses the community room of a train station. There's one in a care home, a library, a theatre. One meeting uses the Robing Room of a courthouse. And another local meeting meets in the Sweet Surprise Café. (Not when it's serving!)

So there are there are lots of places that you can find that work for Quaker worship. So think creatively, and keep looking around.

### **Some more thoughts:**

There's no theological basis for having meeting houses.

Quakers can worship anywhere, anytime.

George Fox took people out of the churches.

Radical Quakerism didn't start out having meeting houses.

Some say our ancestors built them as a safe space, away from persecution - which we don't face now...

I think we've discovered, through the pandemic, that we can worship deeply in all sorts of new places – outdoors, on Zoom, at different times, on different days.

Someone said to me recently:

“All of this experimentation is, at least for some, loosening the hold that the meeting house has on their sense of what a Quaker meeting looks like. We're all experiencing the fact that a meeting can worship, and be a functioning community, without occupying a physical building.”

If Quakerism is going to be going strong in 10 years' time, don't we need to get out and be where the people are?

The “building” that we need is building our Quaker communities.

I don't want you to misunderstand me: some of our meeting houses do work well for us. Some make a lot of money, are in just the right location, are providing a service to the community. And there are ways that you can use paid staff, to manage the building.

Now I know some people may be weighing up your own situation. I asked in the questionnaire: **“What would you say to a meeting thinking about moving out of its meeting house?”**

Here is what they said:

“Talk to others who have done it. There may be lots of good reasons to stay in a meeting house, but it can be a millstone.” Actually, there were several mentions of millstone.

“Do it! Don't feel any less because you don't have one.”

“If you're struggling with maintaining a large and expensive building as a small meeting, you will find that renting premises takes a huge burden off your shoulders, and allows you to focus on the spiritual life of your meeting. The room where we meet doesn't have the atmosphere of a historic or purpose-built meeting house, but we can still have the depth of worship and the strong sense of fellowship.”

“We do make contributions through area meeting, to help other local meetings which do have meeting houses to cover their costs.”

“If the meeting house is a burden, I would say Go for it! But if the meeting house is well used by the Quakers, and it's not a burden, then there might not be a reason to move.”

“Stay while you can. Ask for help if it is a struggle. If you have to leave don't worry, your lives will get easier.”

“Although it can make sense, I love the old meeting houses and visit them when circumstances permit. It is a difficult decision and I hold anyone who has to make it in my thoughts.”

“I would say DO IT! Nobody needs the terrible burden of property management.”

And then a final four:

“Enjoy it, let go, concentrate on the bare essentials - forget the library.”

“Live adventurously and trust in the leading of the Spirit.”

“Focus on what you would gain, rather than what you think you will lose.”

“A meeting is the people, not the building.”

Jonathan Carmichael

April 2021