

FRIENDS AND GLOBAL CHANGE:

A response to the queries on global change

by the Global Change Group

of Friends World Committee for Consultation – Europe and Middle East Section

When FWCC World Office started its consultation process on Friends and Global Change and developed a set of queries to facilitate it some two years ago, FWCC-EMES decided to set up a Global Change Google Group to contribute to the reflection needed. Yearly meetings and Quaker groups from across our Section were invited to appoint Friends to serve on this group.¹

The resulting exchange of views soon demonstrated that the Friends participating had already put a lot of thought into the causes and effects of global change, have changed some of their ways of life and have taken appropriate action. It also demonstrated that Friends live in contexts which are rather different one from the other, that Friends hold divergent views and therefore – not entirely surprisingly for us Quakers- the responses to the queries are multifaceted indeed. So for a clerk/convenor it feels like a ‘meeting for worship for business’ where it is rather difficult to capture the ‘sense of the meeting’ in a form that is ‘acceptable’ to Friends. Against this background we will report on the consultation process by staying as close as possible to the individual contributions, working them into a report which looks a little like yet another ‘Quaker Tapestry’, this time on Friends and Global Change.

First of all the participants in this group felt that next to rising queries about the way in which individual Friends and their meetings are affected by and respond to global change spiritually and practically would be insufficient if we do not complement this by a set of queries addressing the challenges Quakers are facing at a collective and international level. Just like the queries in Quaker Faith and Practice have these twofold focus: our spiritual life, worship, the ‘way-in’ and our responsibility to help build the Kingdom, to make a contribution as good citizens and stewards in societal and political terms, the ‘way-out’. Our tradition of ‘concerns’ does need both: the way-out is usually born out of the ‘way-in’....So we set about developing a second set of queries in addition to those offered by the World Office. In the following report we are therefore responding to all twelve queries, the original and the additional ones.

We started with some real hesitations. These queries are about a huge and complex theme indeed. Would it be possible to generate some focus, some ‘sense of the meeting’ at all?

We decided we would at least just try!

¹ Friends from different Yearly Meetings and Quaker bodies participated in this Global Change Group, amongst them Britain YM, Ireland YM, France YM, German YM, Netherlands YM, Sweden YM, European and Middle East Young Friends and QCEA.

FIRST SIX QUERIES ON FRIENDS AND GLOBAL CHANGE:

1. How has global change affected our communities and ourselves?

One Friend responded: this is a huge question, which I find extremely difficult to encompass.

Global change is much wider than global warming, or the globalisation of trade. It encompasses the increasing homogenisation of human aspirations (including the phenomenal spread of information sharing tools), the increasing dominance of financial and monetary relations, the increasing speed of secularisation, despite counter movements, the universalisation of consumerist aspiration and its materialist bases for starters. All of these have powerful impacts on the community where I live and where I have worked –until recently- in a paid capacity.

These changes have brought immense benefits to everyone in communities like mine which has been one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Britain, in terms of opportunities to develop skills and activities, in health care etc. However, taken as a whole package, it has created a society which has become enthralled to false gods to such an extent that it has woefully little capacity to take any robust action to alleviate the damage it has already wreaked on the planet and, also, I believe, on its own members. What are these false Gods?

Convenience; comfort; status; possession; more experiences; more things; (mind you I fully understand the attraction of the washing machine to those without one....). Society has accustomed us to the superficial and the ephemeral...so that it becomes unthinkable that for any reason whatsoever, however urgent and however vital, we should consent to reducing our demands on the system to go on supplying us with more and more...which is achieved by a capitalism that ensures that a large part of the more goes in reality to a tiny handful of grotesquely wealthy people.

For a long time I have consciously tried to live my life against the spirit of the age and have found Quaker faith to be a huge resource in the faltering steps I have taken. This has led me to give up my academic post and take up less well-paid and secure jobs in community work; it has led me to try to buy what I need in ways which are more in tune with Quaker testimonies, whether in relation to social justice or the environment. It has led me to live in a less privileged part of town, instead of much more privileged areas, where most folk of my educational and social position would choose to live; it has meant that I have not flown anywhere since 1996...and soon...but, of course, even so, the dream-merchants of the global market aren't to be escaped so easily and completely and there are aspirations and dreams, temptations and issues, where I am still in thrall to them, even in the knowledge that true happiness and a deep sense of rightness that goes with it, is not found on those lines.

In short, I see the factors of global change challenging the claims of the spirit...and that my spiritual exercise needs to be gained in a stance of continuing resistance to those powers.

Another Friend in responding to this query asked herself: what do I see that is changing? There are social changes, political, economic and environmental (to name a few). Some changes people see, some are happening without recognition, and some are obvious but we deny their existence. Political/economic changes are happening, such as the USA losing its hegemony and Asia/China entering the new superpower status. That is a vast change, but is somehow less disconcerting to me (as a USA-citizen), since history is full of such shifts, complicated and perhaps traumatic as they may be.

I see change in the way we communicate with each other, which concerns me. We are more able to communicate without being face to face. Even the phone is used less and replaced by the computer, so there is not even a voice to expose the human response, let alone a face to see. This form of communication is usually immediate and brief. This takes away something from our humanity.

I see a change in our economy. At present we are living in a primarily capitalist economy, which does not recognise that the earth has limited resources. I used to ask if I, at 48, would live long enough to see the collapse of capitalism, but I think I am watching it happen each day. I ask myself if it will be a massive collapse, followed by a social and political collapse. I hope not. I hope we are somehow wise enough to be developing alternate ways, and there are clear voices about sustainability, but the voices in power desire greater profit at cost to our (and other species) future on this earth.

I see us supporting practices which are poisoning our earth in the name of feeding an ever growing population that, in the long term, the earth cannot support. The Stockholm Resilience Centre identified nine interconnected earth processes: climate change, stratospheric ozone, land use change, freshwater use, biological diversity, ocean acidification, nitrogen and phosphorous inputs to the biosphere and oceans, aerosol loading and chemical pollution.

SRC then considered the safe levels 'beyond which, if boundaries are crossed, could have unacceptable consequences on our ability to live on the earth and concluded that we have likely already crossed three of these boundaries. Change in the planet's natural processes are not waiting for our compromising and self-interested politics.

I see change in the human atmosphere. I sense a lack of positive vision for the future. I sense a growing dehumanisation of the other. The ever increasing value placed on money, and the increasing amount we fear we need, brings a sense of increasing instability.

How has this affected our communities and ourselves? I sense powerlessness around me. I do not see people full of energy and vision, but instead, growing concern and little sense of how they can make a difference. With a specific issue like climate change, I am amazed how little people engage in this discussion. I am not talking about Quakers, but with all folks, with the communities around me. I can talk about 'using less', but I think our societies need a greater vision, one that includes using less but with a positive vision in the goal. I do not see this happening without a spiritual shift in our communities and ourselves. A spiritual shift that values the earth on which we live (our 'spaceship earth', to quote a fellow Quaker, Kenneth Boulding). The vision of which I sense we lack is one that breathes with a spiritual base, not a purely political, economic or environmental one. The desire to cherish that which is around us, whether humans, animals or planetary processes, begins from within. As Quakers, we may have a midwifery role in this possibly very painful birthing process. A young Friend responded: maybe my perspective on this question is different as a young(er) person than some of the responses which Friends have offered thus far. I have become adult in the age of Information Technology, and I see the connectedness which this has brought about as one of the benchmarks of our age. "My community" consists not only out of people who I see regularly in daily life, but also out of snippets of communication which I receive from people (many of them other young Quakers), some of them many thousands of kilometres away. I would hesitate to say that this hyper-communication, so typical of our age, has impoverished my experience of community. However, this hyper-community would not have been possible without infra-structural developments in developing countries which have given friends in these lands access to IT.

That leads me inevitably to consider what the impact of this IT revolution is. Has my (partial) reliance on virtual communication diminished my need for "actual" community? What is the environmental impact of this virtual communication?

The impact of this global revolution has for me been (almost entirely) positive. After I met my future wife at an international Quaker gathering in 2002, we were able to keep in daily contact via e-mail until I was able to come and visit her in the Netherlands. Now that I live here, IT helps me stay in touch with my family and friends in the UK.

The information revolution is inevitably linked to economic revolution. This, too, cannot only be described in negative terms. The industries of the twentieth century are disappearing, and this causes inevitable pain and upset. However, I would prefer to see an operating computer plant or a row of wind turbines rather than a coal mine on my doorstep, and my education would serve me better to work there.

2. What actions have we taken in response to global change as experienced in our area, to express our responsibilities towards all creation? In what ways have my own activities or those of my community contributed to positive or adverse local and global change?

I am trying as best as I can to live a simple lifestyle, for sustainability as well as for equality - what is good enough for others, should be good enough for me. I live in a terraced house, in an old mining community (where the mines have now closed, meaning there are no jobs), a good working-class area. I don't drive (although I am currently learning to, as I will need this for future work), but commute daily on public transport, and I enjoy walking. I buy only what I need, am terrified of ending

up with a mountain of stuff like my parents. I do enjoy travelling, though, but try to avoid flying. Even so I probably use more than my share of the earth's resources.

This type of 'individualism' will never be enough, though, we have to change society and care for others. Quakers convinced me of this. That's why I'm a socialist and that's why I'm studying to be a social worker. I'm trying to campaign and do as much good as I can.

The task is enormous, which is why we can only achieve it if we if we are organised collectively.

As for my society, I think much is pointing in the wrong direction. Looming cuts will make injustices even more stark, but I'm convinced people will fight back and I will be part of it. This is currently the main issue. As for environmental concerns: we have finally got a local authority compost - I grew up with this years ago! Trains should of course be electrified and made much cheaper, I think about it as I use them daily. And yes, I think many people are too materialistic, but here they really don't have much.

It's the culture of capitalism, where everything is about buying and selling - commodities, services, labour, people.

Of course we need a different system.

Another Friend felt: as always, I find it hard to interpret who the "we" (in the query) are.

If "we" are Quakers in my (local) Meeting, I think we all try hard to live within what our heritage requires of us, and we try to keep ourselves informed as to the "big issues" of our time. One attender has organised a "reading group" which has been well attended and which has studied and discussed the (difficult) idea of "equality". The next topic on our list is "food".

We seem to be shy about addressing the political implications of what we discuss, and to consider how we should hold our politicians (UK and devolved) to account. There's a sense of "backing-off" - we "don't want to go there" - when, for example, I have raised the possibility that we should connect with the work of the UK based Church Action on Poverty. Yet - as I said before - we must have a political framework which will enable us to make (or at least contribute to) the need for positive action on local and global change. We are a long way from having this, and things have become a good deal worse since the UK General Election in May 2010.

My own activities? I engage with my fellow citizens on these matters; I am active with Friends of the Earth, and with the work of a group of Catholic religious Sisters who are trying to inspire us to be better informed and to see the possibility of some positive outcomes from the present (truly awful!) mess into which we find ourselves.

I am collaborating with colleagues in Dublin on a project to help create the "well informed and confident citizenry" (as David Orr puts it) who will be needed if we are to survive. I am engaged with the work of a friend in England who is trying (with others) to prevent some totally inappropriate city regeneration taking place where he lives. I try to find opportunities to encourage better understanding and the possibilities for creative change

Another Friend answered that the first part of this query can be answered from my perspective with a considerable array of examples of Quaker individual and corporate responses, both at the level of the local and area meeting and Britain Yearly Meeting. I can't be exhaustive but the following would be some examples, just relating to climate change and the connected struggle for the national and global equality: Local and Area Meetings: Social and Environmental Advisory Group tasked with assessing all the work of the Area Meeting in relation to environmental and social issues: transport to Meetings; purchasing policies; electricity supplier (renewable) etc'Lifestyle Group' from 1992 and now 'Walk Cheerfully Group' exploring our lifestyles and raising awareness in local Meetings.

Tree planting - annual event for Area Meeting for the last decade as a tangible expression of our concern. Interventions with Meeting for Sufferings and Yearly Meeting towards the recognition of a Testimony on Sustainability (at York) Creation of Advices and Queries for Quaker Motorists Raising the issue of flying at Area Meeting and putting on an exhibition about it at Mount Street FMH. Holding vigils on the theme on the steps of Mount Street, including on Zero Growth at the last election. Strong influence on the process of securing a BYM Statement in the run-up to Copenhagen. Letter writing campaigns on global equality, national equality and climate change. Minor involvement in the 'Living Witness Project's' contribution to consultations on green issues. Our Social Justice group brought Richard Wilkinson (author, with Kate Pickett, of *The Spirit Level*, to talk to Friends and others about their conviction that inequality is destructive of humanity etc. In many ways myself and my Quaker community locally have been involved in encouraging change which should be positive but, we have to acknowledge, that most of us are enmeshed in practices and processes that are counter to our deeper aspirations ... it may be flying on holiday, when we don't have to; it may be over-reliance on the convenience of the car; it may be shopping on price rather than through a sense of where our purchasers will help biodiversity, limit climate change etc. the fact is that while we say that we want the world to be very different we are inoculated by the false gods of comfort, convenience and our aspirations have been partly captured by the secular agenda, so that we have no longer got a sense of being led spiritually in the direction that we sense we ought to go; so our efforts remain half-hearted and incomplete.

In a similar vein: this is a little difficult to reply to, as a lot of my lifestyle choices were made some years ago, so strictly speaking cannot be considered as a direct response to global change. For example growing as much as our own fruit and vegetables as possible, and using organic methods; burning wood to partially heat our house from renewable sources on our own land, so we use the electric heaters a lot less. Other personal choices were made with global change very much in mind; not to travel by plane (admittedly, this was an easy choice), to try and buy locally produced goods and food, but this becomes impossible, where information technology and electronic goods are concerned; the answer lies in buying less stuff, I feel, and buying stuff is a difficult habit to break.

Another knotty problem is local transport; I am a community nurse, and my work requires me to drive around the countryside a lot, in all kinds of weather. So I purposely chose a small car, but I still drive around a lot, and it is far from ideal, but is the best I can think of, until the motor manufacturing industry comes up with something better.

To sum up my personal efforts, I would say that there is a big difference between what I know has to be done, and what I actually achieve. One or two of you have mentioned the addiction to comfort, I agree with this.

Here in rural France I would say that there has been less attachment to comfortable life styles, but this is changing, especially with the younger generation which is seduced by relentless advertising. Is the solution to have less advertising?

Industrial agriculture generates other problems. Global markets and the big supermarkets keep prices low, for farmers here in Brittany, they are trapped by a system which demands cheaper food. Developing countries are then flooded by this cheap food, which affects their own agriculture.

An ageing population here increases the demand for health care professionals, who are encouraged by better pay to leave their native countries, thus creating a problem in those countries. In Brittany this is especially true; we have a large elderly population and a lack of doctors. However in response to global change the regional council is encouraging renewable energy, and energy conservation. They also have started to discuss strategies for when the climate does change, and have produced a document which puts forward hypotheses and solutions in very general terms. There are two key words: attenuation i.e. reducing the problem, and adaptation, which speaks for itself.

3. How do changes around us affect our relationship with God? How does my relationship with God affect my responses to changes around us? What role does faith have in my life and in the life of the community? In what ways do I and my Friends church or meeting community bear witness to our Testimonies in our daily lives?

I am trying to make my faith the centre of my life. In society at large, people often blame religious 'fanatics' for not separating religion and politics. I am absolutely convinced myself that they cannot be separated. If you are religious, you must be so at all times and not just sometimes. If you believe in God, you must always obey, whether it's in a sphere others call 'politics' or not. So this is what I'm trying to do, though sometimes I fail in my ambition and don't listen to God when I should do.

However, it is difficult to be religious in an increasingly secular society. I might trace my beliefs back to my faith, but if I say so publicly, I'm considered a bit mad. On the other hand, those who do publicly defend a religious standpoint often have intolerant views I don't agree with. So I feel trapped in the middle between right-wing intolerant evangelical Christians and progressive atheists, who I otherwise agree with and generally feel closer to.

It can be difficult among Quakers as well. To me belief in God is the centre of Quakerism. We try to do the will of God, it's what we're all about.

The scale of the problems - global warming; habitat and biodiversity loss; renewed deepening of inequalities - that have loomed up, in contrast to the apparent progressive sense of unproblematic development in the late 40s to early 60s, in my experience has created a sense of urgency in my spiritual life. What is being done to our - God's - world? There is also in there the potential for a despair that may lead us to question the reality of a God in a world where this is happening. But, for me, the darkness is still an impetus to faithful action rather than that. It is also my experience that every aspect of our life choices seems more clearly problematic; we may have thought in the past that we could shop innocently, but we know now that we can't; everything builds up or dismantles God's kingdom both in our hearts and in our common or divided lives. In this way the crises have made even more real to me than before the Quaker understanding of the whole of life as sacramental - now including where we decide to take our holidays; whether to fly or not; what to do about a car; where we hold and how we use our money and everything else. I have found this to be a way of deepening and extending my sense of what prayer can be which brings it into a more complete fusion with one's material life. For me the most important thrusts of a response are to do with faithfulness and truth. Somehow, we need desperately to see clearly what is happening to the world and what part we are playing in that. Somehow or other my sense of that there is at the heart of life the possibility of forgiveness and rebirth; believing that enables me to see the things in my life which are damaging without being disabled by them; progressively some of these are worked through to create a relationship to other human beings and the world of nature which is more right than it was before. For me, faith requires that sense of truth about oneself; the sense that we must not hide from the truth, or we will be hiding from God too. Faithfulness is simply doggedly pursuing a vision that is centred on my experience of God (however that is understood) without counting the likelihood of success; only the necessity to face in a particular direction. In all of this, faith as grown in and through the Quaker community is a necessary counter to the immense power of the dominant forces of the age which preach implicitly and often explicitly, consumerism, rather than simplicity, inequality rather than equality and are destructive to the rich diversity of the world. We will be constantly tempted to worship false gods, if we are immersed in the secular market place and do not know a living faith which has very different foundations. Much of the above will give a context for my response as an individual Friend. Perhaps more vividly, faith has been the guiding revelation that has transformed my life: in short, it led me in complex ways to change my career from university lecturer and become a community worker; then, later, to throw in my lot with the hard pressed community in Ordsall where I was working, by coming to live here too ... the only people who choose that social trajectory are those who have a faith guidance ... most often, perhaps sadly, Evangelical Christians, rather than liberal Quakers.

So, how do I see this question in terms of the wider Quaker community? Generally there is much faithfulness and a huge amount of positive action in terms of our testimonies. What I think we haven't generally managed to do is to combine a fluid liberal theology with a passionate commitment that finds its response in terms of an irresistible leading to live out one's understanding of faith, whatever the cost. There is a tendency to go so far and no further because the motivation hasn't quite the quality of the transcendent. In short, the ways of the world and the values of the world militate against actions which are too costly. In what ways do I and my Friends church or meeting community bear witness to our testimonies in our daily lives? For me: in terms of equality and community, moving my home and job to a socially alienated and deprived community here in Ordsall; working with my Quaker Area Meeting's Social Justice Group to encourage reflection on the need for greater equality in society (vigils on the steps of the Meeting House; lobbying MPs; arranging speakers such as Richard Wilkinson (who, with Kate Pickett, wrote *The Spirit Level*); working with allied groups such as Church Action on Poverty, the Equalities Trust etc. In terms of Sustainability: giving up flying; giving up the car and walking, cycling and using public transport; using a wood fired boiler with our own wood; installing PV panels on the roof; encouraging Friends locally and nationally to join in the process of reducing our dependence on carbon; lobbying; joining organisations like the RSPB and funding projects to preserve or restore habitats and encourage biodiversity. Much else, some of which touches also on the Peace Testimony, on Global Justice, On Truth Our economic system allows the cost of things to be a false estimate of the real cost as it takes no note of the externalities that are borne by the community or, quite as much, the communities of the future. My meeting is involved in much of this, though often as a supporting cast; a number of Friends, however, have taken far reaching decisions about their lifestyles and actions and the Meeting as a whole is generally supportive. I wouldn't say that it is easy to galvanise the whole Quaker community on any of the challenges of global change; but some of them will join in some of the time. Another friend, for example, has sold a large house in the suburbs and established a Trust Fund of c. £500,000 to be used by groups in harder pressed communities in Greater Manchester - and she has moved to East Manchester to share in the life of the community there, rather than her long-standing home in the "desirable" Wilmslow. Several Friends have given up flying. Some devote large amounts of time and money to help those caught in the tangle of the Asylum system.

Another Friend writes: when I first read question 3, I must admit I did panic slightly, as it seemed a rather difficult question to answer. However on reflection I feel that as someone who is searching to deepen their spiritual life, and to think beyond concerns of everyday living, the question of how my relationship with God affects my response to global change is actually primordial. It is something that has coloured my judgment for some time now without really realizing it, or putting a name to it. It is not always a comfortable situation. Because, when I am not feeling particularly aware and act merely on a whim, or follow others without thinking, then later on during a quiet moment, my lack of good judgment becomes all too apparent. Being part of the Global Change Group has made me even more aware of the implications of my actions. I suppose that what I am saying is that "listening to the light" leads to a greater awareness of all aspects of global change.

4. What stories and experiences from past times of catastrophic happenings such as major droughts – perhaps from Scripture, perhaps the record of regional or local events- might inspire us to respond to changes the world is facing today?

I find these queries quite difficult to answer.

I know environmental issues are not a new problem. The very first civilisations battled with issues such as erosion and overgrazing. People have always found it difficult to respect natural limits. So we can look at the warnings from the past, try and avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over (as we have done)... But I can't think of any stories which inspire a solution - only to look at societies (which do and have existed) living in harmony with nature. Yes, we can use technology, but mainly we need to change our attitudes.

Another participant responded: I share the feeling that this is a difficult question to answer in the words in which it is stated. The task of us all - perhaps especially our politicians and decision makers - is to learn from the past but (more importantly) *** do something about the implications of that learning in the context of what we now have and know ... and now need***!

It's not so much about past catastrophes, more about "waking up". Since around the 1970's, we have lost a sense that we require politics and politicians to work **with us**, to identify and address problems. We have, I suspect, lost the confidence to "speak truth to power". We may have lost an understanding of the possibilities for creative and peaceful change. We have, undoubtedly, let public affairs drift into a pointless vision of a solution by undifferentiated economic growth and pseudo democracy.

We have forgotten - if we ever knew them - Kenneth Boulding's words:

"... I believe furthermore that the Society of Friends has a vital role to play in the future development of mankind, small perhaps in quantity, but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden which it may imply would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole."

These losses are not catastrophes on the scale of major droughts, but their implications are certainly catastrophic!

I am a citizen of the USA, and I live in a country, Germany, where there is a powerful reminder of a Quaker response that was not perhaps the first thing civilians from the Allied countries would think to do. Help those who had just waged war against them. I used to work in Palestine. There, Quakers were also the first to help the new refugees, until UNRWA was established. Perhaps these are not major droughts, but they are man made catastrophic events in which Quakers acted in ways that were not typical for the average person. I am not saying that we, as Quakers, should have an answer to the world's problems, but I think we have a role in thinking 'out of the box', in acting, taking a lead. We tend to be good at facing problems, rather than denying that the problem exists. We are facing extraordinary challenges in our current period of human history and in the planet's ability to 'cope' with us. We are also facing an increase, I believe, in our civilization's threshold for violence and in our sense of economic vulnerability (a system which is destructive and there seems to be no obvious replacement). So let us remember our past actions in order to face our present. We are not very good at ignoring injustice. We are not very good at supporting violent responses to problems. We are not very good at being happy to just have lots of money, regardless of others. Thank God. We are good at believing that others must benefit if we are to benefit. That living simply is not only healthy for the planet, it is spiritually rich. That there is the potential of God's love living in all human beings, the neighbor Jesus asks us to love is often the stranger. These are healing acts which the world needs in this very vulnerable time. We cannot 'fix' things alone, but I believe we, as Boulding said, have much to give. Let us not be shy.

The old testament is peppered with catastrophes, and the consequences thereof. One immediately thinks of the great flood in Genesis, and the departure of the Israelites and their subsequent wandering in the desert in the books of Exodus and Numbers. Generally speaking, please do correct me if you disagree, European Quakers no longer have a biblical tradition, and I did notice in the FWCC introduction to the consultation on Global Change, there was talk of a covenant with God, which struck me as something unfamiliar.

However, I have over the past few years, been reading through the Bible, and trying to re-connect with biblical traditions. It is turning out to be a very revealing experience. Again and again catastrophes are linked to God's intention to punish humankind or to correct their errant ways, and covenants with God are indeed mentioned. The question I am asking myself is: how can this be relevant to our modern times? Is FWCC, in posing these questions and using the phrase "covenants

with God” attempting to re-ignite a more spiritual, perhaps mystical way of dealing with these questions of global change? I find that - at face value- the scriptures do not offer an answer to changes in the modern world. However it is a strange thing that, although I find a lot to disagree with in the Bible, paradoxically, the act of reading does indeed inspire me to re-connect with the Light within, and thereby lead me to question my way of doing things and the decisions of those who govern us.

I recognise the power of the Old Testament's stories of responses to times of catastrophic happenings, perhaps not least the power of the theme of Exodus and the Promised Land.

I think of modern parallels, perhaps the Irish Potato famine or the Highland Clearances ... and the responses to some of them: the search for a new life in the New World, or the Long March in China (Both could be related to the Exodus theme). Environmentally the Flood is the myth which comes closest to our present situation. The issue of judgment may have changed its appearance for us but it seems to me to be highly relevant ... the loss of biodiversity and all the environmental catastrophes we face is clearly in a way a judgment on the lifestyle of our modern advanced economies; the judgment may not be personified in the same way as in the Bible, but the hubris remains the same and the sense that humankind has brought it on itself by following after the false gods of limitless material consumption.

For me, even in my relatively Liberal and non-traditional faith, the sense of covenant with a divine principle within us and beyond ... which we have broken and continue to break is absolutely meaningful, indeed essential.

Another story which comes to my mind is the story of the (in principle) abolition of slavery - not an environmental disaster perhaps, but an extraordinary awful example of the breaking of the covenant ... and the story of the tenacious and successful efforts to bring to an end practices which represented a distortion of the covenant of right relationships that the Bible shows us as God's intention for us all. Quakers played a role in that process of spreading the gospel of emancipation. We seem to have lost the will to respond in anything like as an effective way to the crises of climate change ... may I be rapidly proved mistaken in this.

But perhaps the story of early Quakers convinced of the truth and selflessly taking their message round so much of the world with extraordinary zeal and yet without the distortions of power that can often accompany such zeal is a memory we need to reflect (on) more fully.

I also agree with other Friends, when we go back just a little further, then the Irish potato famine and the Scottish highland clearances are major factors in the exodus from North West Europe. But I would also add that these settlers and their 'settler mentality' caused many a problem in North America (Turtle Island). Here in Germany the exodus and depopulation from some of the towns & cities in the east over the last 20 years to the west are still noticeable....

Then there is the mass exodus of people within our EMES region in the last 10 years (myself included). Whether it be Swedes moving to Norway, Germans moving to Switzerland & Sweden, or our Polish, Baltic and Hungarian friends moving to Netherlands, Ireland & UK. The promised land is a different thing to different people.

As a 6, almost 7 year old, I remember surprisingly well the UK drought of 1976, a sunny warm Christmas without snow, I remember as a child, mum throwing the dirty dish water onto the tomato plants in the back garden and the funny tasting tomatoes on a Sunday afternoon. I remember regularly having to share a bath with my sister, which didn't please me. I note over the last 20 years many times the Island of Britain has had water shortages, hosepipe bans, and flash flooding. As we are EMES, I would like to move away from Northern Europe to my experiences since 2006 and for those that have never been, a tiny glimpse into the lives of our Friends in the occupied Palestinian

territories, where regular drought and water security is a very serious regional issue. Since 1967 majority of the Israeli Nationalist settlements in the West Bank, Golan Heights or the now abandoned ones in the Gaza strip were built initially on watersprings, or draw water from the Jordan River. (The strategic reason that Israel holds on to the Golan heights is that under these hills the largest subsoil sweet water reserves in the region are to be found! – Kees). As many of you know, I was recently working in the Southern West Bank, where the average rainfall over the last 30 years is only 150 – 250 mm per year. You can imagine then the worries last year when instead of the rains starting in middle October the first rainfall waited until the 7th December and then again for several days properly from 17th December onwards. The last rains were late February, there will be another hard drought, unless a miracle happens. On 14th December 2010 I helplessly had to witness the Israeli Military Authorities demolish several water cisterns that supply water to Palestinian shepherds and in one case a couple of families.

In 1953 tidal waves swept away most of the south-western part of the Netherlands. Many people drowned, all of the cattle got killed, most houses seriously damaged, the arable land salinated so that it was difficult to farm from many years to come. The images were imprinted in the Dutch soul and memory.....

Countries elsewhere in the world offered assistance in the aftermath of this disaster. Amongst them also Pakistan (!) a country that suffered from a similar catastrophe just recently.

In a country like ours, situated as it is in a river delta, where two –thirds of the land surface is actually situated below sea level climate change is a genuine risk!

At the time in the 1950's it was decided to reinforce our world-famous dikes and flood barriers. In view of the rising sea level predicted due to climate change however, we have become increasingly convinced in the Netherlands that (such) technical solutions are no longer the answer. And even if they were: the Netherlands might be able to implement costly technical works to prevent us from flooding, but would that be fair towards e.g. Bangla Desh or small island states like Tuvalu in the Pacific?

The second reason is that the Dutch people –Quakers included- are well aware that there are lots of countries elsewhere in the world that are likewise threatened by climate change, either because they similar low-lying delta areas or they are islands that will be swallowed by the sea. So it is a global challenge which requires global counter veiling action!

And what about the current disastrous hunger – yet again- in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya – the Horn of Africa? Some say there is no denying that this is caused by climate change!

5. How can we bear witness to the abundance God offers us and testify to the world about ways in which justice, compassion and peace may address significant disruption, stress and tension?

The first part of the query seems to me to need two responses which have to come together: our lives need somehow to blossom in relative simplicity; then our witness, if deeply rooted, will reveal a sign of joy within it. Yet that is not enough ... the abundance is real and is not just material things, but it includes our material context; as this is destroyed our witness to that abundance in its fullest sense will be felt in the depth of our pain, whether at the disappearance of the polar bear, the lark orThe second part is hard to make convincing ... it involves letting our lives speak so that the world sees that our testimonies are divinely inspired imperatives for us, rather than mere personal preferences; it needs to involve developing models of living which are Kingdom based and address the destructive power of the dominant economic and social order; it involves an altogether bolder attempt to present our vision, when we are clear that we are in unity and have begun to live closer to it.

One way, I feel, to bear witness to the abundance in this world is to not abuse it and, above all not to take it for granted; this is easier said than done. Like a lot of people, I have been tempted by the delights of retail therapy. We have too much stuff. The young are seduced by the promise of happiness that acquisition brings (around here new housing estates are mushrooming with brand new homes being built by young families) and my elderly patients cling to their possessions, as if they are the only things left for them. It makes me think of Wordsworth's poem: The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in nature that is ours; I think of Buddhist philosophy which cites desire as being the source of suffering, and Catholicism which urges a retreat from the world. My two friends Kate and Sebastien, (who incidentally have answered the first 6 questions in full) have pared down their mode of living to an absolute minimum; they not only have no car, no telephone, no computer, but in their home, for which they pay no rent, they have no running water and no electricity, and they eat what they grow in the garden. I could not possibly live like this. However their example is an inspiration to at least try to live as simply as possible, to value a smaller number of possessions, and be more generous with what we have and moreover to be aware through prayer and meditation, what is going on in our lives and in the world.

6. How can we support one another in rekindling our love and respect for God's creation in such a way that we are messengers of the transforming power of love and hope?

A very dear friend, who is elderly but amazingly dynamic, and who attends meeting for worship when she can, said to me last year that she sees herself as a channel. This immediately struck a chord with me as this is how I see myself as well, as a channel by which the good and positive can reach others. This could sound boastful or self satisfied, or even self delusional, but it is in fact, in my case, an acknowledgement that all by myself, I am not able to achieve very much, very well, and will invariably get things wrong, and I need that divine light. In my daily life and in very small ways indeed, I aim to bear witness to God's abundance, by gestures and words to those around me, to indeed answer that of God in others. When I get things wrong, which I do on a daily basis, it is because I have temporarily forgotten the inward Light, and have let my ego take over. A British priest paid a visit to the white fathers in Algeria (these were the catholic priests who were assassinated, and who were the subject of a recent powerful French film "Les Hommes et les Dieux") and he asked them why they did not try and convert the local population; he was told that their role was to provide a presence, not to preach and convert. I find this story very inspirational. As a lone Quaker here in this northern corner of France, I am not going to convert anybody to the Quaker way, but I can provide a positive presence. The more I pray and meditate, (meditation works very well indeed when one needs to connect with the inward Light) the more I see that of God in everyone I meet. If we are aware of life and lives around us, and are more than merely reactive to people and situations; if we let justice, passion and peace into our lives, then we can find it in other people as well.

For me, the key - as far as liberal Quakers are concerned - would be to find ways in which faith is known as deeply transformative, even if not absolutist. We need to see our lives not as inflected marginally by our faith from our embeddedness in a destructive, secular society but as a shared adventure as people of faith in "living the countersign". So long as we remain comfortably embedded in the world as it is our faith will be contained by the most powerful of scarcely visible prisons. Another starting point to the renewal that is vital might be via acute forms of action - whether of the model building, or protest kinds, which might open up new spiritual vision.

In response to this another Friend felt that all she could say is for us to support people wherever we find ourselves - in our families and meetings, schools and workplaces, and in small acts of kindness to people we just bump in to in the street - a simple smile can mean a lot. Let's pray that we will be channels for love wherever we go. What else can we do?

SIX MORE QUERIES ON FRIENDS AND GLOBAL CHANGE:

7. Do we as a world-wide Quaker community faithfully maintain our testimonies of equality, simplicity, truth, justice and peace in the face of the global challenges of our time? Do we translate them into action at local, national and international levels when called to do so?

My answer is that we do maintain those testimonies ... and much more explicitly in theory than we did 20 years ago - not least because of the rediscovering our Social Testimony process in BYM. But our faithfulness is both significant and inadequate. Generally speaking we are prepared to take up positions nationally that are quite rightly radical and the lives of many Friends are inflected towards what Ian Fraser has called "Living the Countersign" ... but very often the inflection is limited to the bits that don't involve a radical shift, nor a sacrifice ... so that foreign holidays by plane and excessive use of the car are much more common amongst Friends than I think is commensurate with a real understanding of the nature of the damage we are causing to the world for all those who come after us, and for all the other life on it. That is the degree to which our spirituality has been subverted by or subordinated to the global change of ever increasing comfort, convenience and power.

Some better than others. I can always improve, specifically in how I live, since I could live more simply. I have fought off some temptations and living in Germany has helped me to rely more on public transport and my bike, to recycle more efficiently, buy local/organic foods and minimize meat consumption. But Germany is also the biggest polluter in Europe, so we all have much to learn. As one Friend recently wrote, comfort is our great challenge. We slide comfortably into lifestyles that are not sustainable, me included. But I began an MSc on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, as a way to face what I believe are our great challenges, and to become more educated in how we can move forward.

As young Friends we have often wrestled with the Testimonies at our gatherings and sought to rediscover for ourselves the grounding in these basic principles. The challenges to the testimonies which we have experienced in our everyday lives have actually strengthened our faith in the testimonies as the core of our belief. Again, it is necessary, I feel, to recognise that the testimonies are guidelines for ones' life to be explored, not prescriptive rules. For one young Friend it will feel right to own a car, for another not. For some of us, social networking sites such as Facebook represent an attack on our simple way of life; for others they are an active element of our community.

The degree of difference in our responses to the testimonies has also varied. For young Friends, Truth and Peace are as unquestionable as ever (although we have discussed to what extent direct action can be counted as peaceful.) Simplicity and the emerging testimony to the Earth provide us with much food for consideration and thought. I have never experienced the testimonies as feeling dated, precisely because they challenge us to provide our own response to them. Jesus' message was above all one of love, I feel, for our fellow human-beings but also for ourselves. A dogma allows us to indulge in self-hatred, while a testimony keeps on encouraging us to rediscover the truth and remain open to the light.

8. Do we as a world-wide Quaker community take up our responsibilities for the conduct of local, national and international affairs in responding effectively to the interlocking economic, ecological, climatic, food, energy and political/institutional crises?

I don't think Quakers are doing enough. I see anti-cuts work as the main priority at the moment, probably worldwide as well as locally and nationally, and I haven't seen Quaker bodies involved in this (yet). Yes, I think Quakers are good people and do much good work, individually and collectively, but it's too much charity and too little justice, too much helping the system's losers rather than changing the system itself, helping the poor rather than abolish poverty. Much of this comes with too many Quakers having middle class values, I believe.

Despite the evidence that in this area Friends have been moderately active, I would still broadly agree that our corporate response (and my individual response) falls well short of the transformative response that the interconnected crises requires of us. We are still not really geared up to being an activist community with a powerful sense that the world needs to be turned upside down and that it is our spiritual conviction that much of our task lies there. And, in particular we have not really settled as a community to recognise that the whole system works in opposition to our testimonies and to true Life ... so we make minutes which point in this direction but have failed to become a community dedicated to a quite different vision ... of peace, simplicity, truth and equality.

I know that individual Quakers are aware of global change, and are active in responding to crises. However the question is aimed at Quakers world wide. and I feel that the response to global crises, is piecemeal, unlike our response to peace issues. But perhaps this is why a world wide consultation is so necessary and important at this moment in time?

I wish I could say 'yes', but I have to say - briefly - that while I am well supported by individual Friends in Ireland, Britain, Netherlands and Canada, I do not feel supported by national and international Quaker initiatives. I have tried to find support for a "Quaker concern for the Economy", but my efforts only produce responses from individuals. We should - as a Society with a magnificent heritage - be banging on doors over the conduct of the EU and our national governments. But I see little sign of this. Forgive me, Friends if I am mistaken.

Another participant responded to this saying: I am sorry to hear that. Throughout our history, Friends have often felt challenged by how conventional economic systems seem to fail at "doing" justice. On the basis of our beliefs in Peace, Human Rights, Economic Justice and Democratic government, the Quaker Council for European Affairs makes representations on behalf of European Quakers to those in decision-making roles. Only yesterday, one of my colleagues was lobbying me to advocate for moral values in European law and financial practices. I also know from personal experience that QCEA takes economic matters seriously. So I think it is fair to say we take economic justice seriously in this office (though, I myself may not be the best person to embody this message to decision-makers). Progress in this area, as you will probably readily admit, is sometimes difficult to quantify. Regardless, perhaps we could converse and define what it is (specifically) we would like to be proposed to the EU, so that we can have a meaningful exchange about what is doable, both in terms of the appropriateness of the proposed action, and the resources required and/or available. We can also discuss the way QCEA communicates its efforts and achievements at the European level, and the ways we could better engage Quakers throughout Europe. Interestingly these contributions seem to point in a particular direction. Friends agree that 'the system' needs to be changed radically. The word radically stems from 'root': the system needs to be uprooted! Friends call for a transformative response that the interconnected crises requires of us a community dedicated to a quite different vision ... of peace, simplicity, truth and equality. Friends advocate for a "Quaker concern for the Economy" aimed at changing the system. Friends realise that this query is aimed at Quakers world wide. So it seems this would call for a consultation –not so much amongst European Friends, within Europe and about the work programme of QCEA – but of the global vision, agenda and work programme of our Quaker international work as a whole! So as one Friend contributed: this is why a world wide consultation is so necessary and important: so that we may become a community (again) with quite a different vision, a people of faith "living the countersign", developing models of living which are Kingdom based and address the destructive power of the dominant economic and social order. Although Friends are hesitant to use them: in theological terms this would mean rejecting a Neo-Constantine stance in life, adopting an attitude we would share with our fellow peace church the Mennonites, or as early Friends called it 'primitive Christianity revived'!

9. Do we as a world-wide Quaker community encourage our international Quaker agencies (FWCC, QUNO, QCEA) sufficiently to contribute to the necessary transformation of the current economic system into a more just and equitable economy? Remember this also requires us to support and respond to these agencies' projects, publications and calls.

When it comes to international Quaker bodies, I think Quakers' degree of commitment to them varies greatly. On the one hand you have the people who are actively involved in them as representatives, on the other attenders (and quite possibly some members) who have never heard of them. I think in general there is more commitment in smaller Yearly Meetings, simply because the representatives form a much larger proportion of the members. But I do think we could do more to increase people's awareness of, and commitment to, those bodies.)

Another Friend replies: probably not. In the UK it has been easier to focus on issues like homelessness, refugees, poverty etc without making the connection in full to the economic order which determines the fate of the refugees, the homeless and the poor in general. It has taken the growing evidence that the crisis of climate change is created by systematic economic forces to begin to gather a larger number of Friends who are prepared to see the system as the problem. In the UK we have had a certain amount of work on economic issues for a while and this is still building with the work carried out last year on the Zero Growth economy. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book, the Spirit level has also been a very significant factor in helping Friends to see that the economic system fuels unsustainability and inequality at the same time. All this, together with the increased awareness of the Testimonies to Simplicity, Equality and Sustainability over the last 15 to 20 years is certainly feeding the sense that the system has to change for our testimonies to really become embedded in social and economic practice. Although QCEA and QUNO have played some part in this (QCEA conferences; QUNO work on the WTO etc exposing the huge inequalities globally) on the whole UK Friends are rather insular and we often limit our sights to the BYM level rather than beyond in terms of thinking of how we might influence our own transnational organisations, or so it seems to me. It seems to me that they are doing some very good work, especially on issues that are not necessarily "headline grabbing" I hope that this FWCC consultation process, will stimulate even more activity; I think that this is going to be very, very necessary in the next few years, as already I am detecting a serious waning of interest in the general public on the subject, especially as we are so media lead, and at the moment, perhaps understandably given what is happening right now in the world, the media seems to be more interested in what happened yesterday than in long term news stories. I trust the FWCC QUNO to keep these important concerns from falling into oblivion.

10. Do we as a world-wide Quaker community actively stimulate our International Quaker agencies working within the framework of the United Nations to also work for the reform of the international institutions (UN, Security Council, IMF, World Bank, WTO etc) themselves, so as to equip them better to build a truly sustainable just and peaceful world order?

All I can think to say is (in the way of Friends): I hope so. I really don't know.

Another participant: in a few words: No, I don't think so!

The international Quaker organisations which exist, with their few staff, do an amazing amount. But if we contributed more financially, they could do more. Well, do we contribute financially enough? I don't think so. The buck stops with us.

The international institutions were set up with the all good intentions, they are not inherently bad, but they have been dominated by the powerful and less scrupulous, such as lobby groups which represent big industrial concerns, for example the oil industry. These groups are well funded, and well organised. Even if Quaker groups are small in comparison, and the task seems insurmountable, they really do need our support. Perhaps we should ask them what kind of support they need?

In my experience they seem to be very good at what they do, and should therefore have an idea as to what world wide Quakers could do for them .

I do think we need to develop a wider set of relationships between Friends at the grassroots and Quaker International institutions; between Yearly Meetings and them too. I think the institutions are largely trying to develop this agenda but there should be more of a sense of the corporate body of Friends urging it to pursue that road. The agenda of reform is particularly hard to make real to Friends at the grassroots and there are many competing demands on our time; to this extent it is probably more realistic to see much of the support and much of the energy for reform coming from bodies like QCEA or Britain Yearly Meeting's Quaker Peace and Social Witness and similar bodies elsewhere.

However when I think of a promised land, I think of Heaven on Earth or better still the republic of Heaven, a republic that needs to start within our own hearts and minds. I am instantly minded that Jesus asks in both the Gospels of Matthew & Luke that we "first seek the reign of G-d and "his/her" justice, and these things will be given to you." I wonder how many of us are actually seeking within ourselves and looking to individually rebuild the covenant with our creator. The Ethiopian Coptic Bible interestingly quotes Jesus building on what the Prophet Isaiah tells us "Seek first the Kingdom and the grace of G-d, which is not meat and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy spirit. Isaiah (32:17) tells us "The fruit of righteousness will be peace; and the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever." How very Quakerly!!! How are we as individuals becoming the answers to our prayers (and prayer for me is not blabbering away to G-d what I want/would like done, but rather being aware of what G-d is expecting from me i.e. G-d reminding us this covenant is a two way bond). I believe, when we ourselves are being authentic and *trying* to live the life G-d wants us to, then it is easier to sustain being patterns and examples as we tread lightly, and when we listen we can answer that of G-d within the others we meet (I'm still working on being a better listener). I believe as I personally try and become a bit more authentic, then I might be able to begin to transform the fallen powers (those institutions that have lost their way), and when there are a lot of us transforming the fallen powers together, the Light begins to shine again. In the case of the UN/WTO/IMF etc , that would mean changing the way they operate i.e. lend, fund, monitor, support. I would like to ask this query slightly differently and simpler: With our combined prophetic witness, how are we reforming the fallen institutions so that they can bring about G-d's will? I personally do not believe that one day there will suddenly be a perfect republic of heaven, and I believe that we citizens of this republic will always have plenty to do in discerning G-d's will and will need to transform a fallen power here and there and bringing them back into our community of justice and Gospel order. How have the past and recent events inspired me? a) I use far less water and energy than I used to (already have 95% renewable energy at home). b) my CO2 footprint remains about 40% of the average German. c) I've stopped planning extensively for my future, and with faith try (sometimes badly) to live the here and now. d) Try to know my limits, listening to my callings and hold others in the light. d) Spending more time and energy on listening to others and building up our inclusive community.

11. Do we as world-wide Quaker community urge our Quaker agencies on to engage in combating climate change effectively by helping to strengthen the United Nations capabilities towards this end? Remember this would first and foremost involve urging our national governments to take appropriate and meaningful action in this respect.

I am not sure how far British Friends have been expecting international work of QUNO etc to prioritise this. There has certainly been a close collaboration with QCEA. There has been a good deal of Quaker individual and corporate action in Britain pleading for greater urgency to be given to this matter ... though I always hope for more

I feel that recent events in the world have distracted the governments, and the media and therefore the general population from the issue of climate change; it is no longer a big issue. All the

more reason than, to keep the subject in the forefront of the public consciousness; but how to do such a thing?

The only answer I can think of is: by example. Our own and other people's - promoting good work wherever we see it, Although we need to be honest about our shortcomings too, forgive ourselves as we forgive others. We need faith, love, tolerance, conquering fear, worry, hate. And we achieve this by prayer, Guidance, patience, trust. Why do we find it so difficult?

12. Do we as a world-wide Quaker community support our international Quaker agencies in working towards abolishing war as an instrument to settle conflicts, disarmament and a 'global zero' for all weapons of mass destruction?

I think we do, though we could do so better. Peace and disarmament are not so central to Friends at this time yet the reality and the prospect of very destructive conflicts over scarce resources and for other reasons makes the issue as important as ever.

Being against war is one of the things we are best at as Quakers... Even so, I think we could do more to have a presence, e.g. on anti-war demos. As for the work of international Quaker bodies I think this is where their strongest support is.

From 17th to 25th of May 2011 we were gathered for the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation (IEPC) at Kingston. Some 1000 participants from over 100 different nations, representing the more than 300 member churches of the World Council of Churches.

There was a modest, but good presence of delegates from the Historic Peace Churches: some 10 Quakers and all in all a little more than 30 Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren.

The keynote speaker at the opening session was our Friend Paul Oestreicher, lifelong peace activist, Anglican priest as well as a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). His contribution was well received by the plenary meeting and entitled: 'A New World is Possible'. Central to his contribution was this message: "We have made a pact with Caesar, with power, the very pact that early Christians called idolatry. Because the newly converted ruler declared it to be our duty, we have squared it with our conscience to kill the Emperor's enemies, and to do this with Jesus on our lips".

As indicated earlier in this report this is the Neo-Constantine position which does not really accord with our peace testimony at all!

The IEPC at Kingston also raises a serious question with the Historic Peace Churches as a living tradition. From the opening session (Paul Oestreicher) to the final message we are referred to as an example.

One might of course say that since the 1953 when the Historic Peace Churches (and IFOR) presented their 'Peace is the Will of God: A Testimony to the World Council of Churches', it has taken the mainstream churches time to 'move beyond the doctrine of Just War to the commitment to Just Peace' ... On the other hand: let us rejoice this is so!

It means though that –in the midst of our ecumenical family- members of the three so-called peace churches and the peace movements founded by them, Church and Peace and IFOR, need to patiently persist in the responsibility to witness. To witness to our heritage: the deeply held conviction that to follow the non-violent way is an integral part of being a disciple of Jesus. In this respect it is of course a pity that only a small number of Mennonite, Quaker and Brethren groups throughout the world are full-fledged members of the World Council of Churches at the moment. Perhaps this is something that needs serious reconsideration in the light of this historic meeting at Kingston, Jamaica?

In conclusion:

Quite a few of the contributions made by Friends in the course of this consultation process are about our allegiance to 'false gods' rather than building and living the Kingdom of God in this broken world. A clear call is made for Friends to return to a prophetic vision, counter veiling the powers of the world.

The image of the Kingdom of God is present throughout the Gospels, Acts and Letters. In Mark and Luke Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God and likens it to a tiny mustard seed (Mark 4:30) that can grow into a large tree. It is near (Mark 1:15, Mark 12:14. Luke 10:11) and within reach (Luke 17:21). In Matthew, we read that Jesus teaches us to pray 'your Kingdom come... on earth as in heaven'.....Friends throughout their history had a special vision of the Kingdom of God. It was not some faraway place in terms of time and space, some sort of hereafter. Neither was it a future state of affairs. Rather, early Quakers believed in what is called the 'realised eschatology': firmly believing the Kingdom is near, that it does start here and now, that we as Friends of Jesus are part of its beginning and that we need to be the Light and salt in this world, building the Kingdom. In Kenya the worldwide family of Friends will meet and consider what this means for us today. Having lived and worked (joyfully) amongst Kenyan Friends, albeit a convinced Friend from a liberal tradition holding silent meetings for worship, the worldwide Quaker community is not an abstraction to me. I have discovered that in this large and pluriform family we share at least three precious gifts:• Firstly, the vision of the 'realised eschatology', which calls us to help to build the Kingdom here and now.• Secondly, what we can call the fruits of our faith: the testimonies. We need to remind one another to act upon them, also in the form of corporate testimony.• Thirdly, our decision-making method. In meeting for worship for business it is possible to be united as a worldwide body of Friends witnessing to the need for our faithful living up to the testimonies' power to transform the world around us. And Friends, if ever there was a need for that, it is now! We are facing interlocking challenges and crises related to climate, biodiversity, food, water resources, energy, the economic situation and security. We need to discern openings for creative contributions from Friends - through our Yearly Meetings throughout the world and through our Quaker agencies (FWCC, QUNO and QCEA). What if Friends were to faithfully and patiently embark upon a campaign to banish poverty and war this century, just like earlier Friends worked to end slavery? Would not that be answering the call to build the Kingdom of God here and now? Questions to ponder:

1) Could you envisage us Quakers to make creative contributions to address the challenges and crises causing global change?

2) How might we work together as a worldwide Quaker family to banish poverty and war this century?

As stated earlier: it is high time we Friends discern through a worldwide consultation process what vital role the Religious Society of Friends can play in this respect, a role –in the words of our Friend Kenneth Boulding, the critical economist- "...small perhaps in quantity, but of enormous importance in quality, and that to refuse to take on this role or to run away from the burden which it may imply would be a betrayal of trust and a tragedy not only for the Society of Friends but for mankind as a whole."

On behalf of the FWCC-EMES Global Change Group,

Kees Nieuwerth.

July 2011.