

## Sustainability Literacy for Friends

Louise Salinas, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, September 2018

Years ago, I was in Honduras representing Friends World Committee at a major event for the Yearly Meeting there. An older local Friend of slight build and weathered face with a wide (and mostly toothless) grin came over to our row of folding chairs to greet us. I can still see him, with his front shirt pocket-liner filled with pens and pencils - like an old-time salesman, carrying his tools of the trade. But he could not actually read or write, I learned. I smiled kindly, and inside felt sad that his life had not allowed him the most basic of literacy skills.

It is hard for some of us to understand why not all Friends are on board with a personal commitment to living sustainably. Friends need a program of sustainability literacy, and FWCC's sustainability office can help. The United Nations [defines sustainability literacy](#) as “the knowledge, skills and mindsets that allow individuals to become deeply committed to building a sustainable future and assisting in making informed and effective decisions to this end”. It is no easy task. Sustainability evokes images from “green” buildings and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to an almost religious fervor to embrace veganism and purchase fewer things. The word itself is overused (seven times in two paragraphs already!), but the problems are concrete and endless.

The good news is that with 80+ years of building bridges of understanding among Friends, FWCC already has the blueprint for growing Friends' sustainability literacy. Experiencing a face-to-face gathering with Friends whose worship style or understanding of Biblical authority is unlike their own, makes it easier to inch toward the common ground that is found closer to center.

Quaker sustainability literacy can share this same framework. Meeting Friends with the same care and respect shown for theological differences should also apply to listening to different experiences of climate change. Personal stories can influence our thinking much more than holding up facts and figures. FWCC provides [good resources](#) for talking about climate change with each other.

I left Quaker service a few years ago to work for what many consider the single greatest, global challenge of our time – a more sustainable world. Through my work at the [Committee on Sustainability Assessment](#), the realities of small farmers came face to face for me on a visit to a farm owned by Hugo, in the premiere [Tarrazu coffee-growing region](#) of Costa Rica. I asked whether he had any insights about climate change. The harvest cycles are off, he says. Coffee plants blossom early then become dormant, blossom again then slumber again, so the cherries ripen accordingly, in stages. With the harvest spread out over a longer time, he has to pay the indigenous migrant workers who travel from Panama to handpick the coffee, to stay longer.

Compounding the climate challenge for him is an economic reality: Hugo's two sons “went north” recently (actually, to near where I live in Southeastern Pennsylvania) for a better shot at earning money to pay off some loans, possibly farm related. He does not know when, or whether, they will return to keep the farm going.

When Friends come together through FWCC and listen to each other, worshipping together elevates us to a higher level of joy and blessedness. In the same way, finding any common ground amongst ourselves on the future of the earth and its people through our personal stories can take us to unprecedented levels of living our faith. It will take time. May the swiftest and loudest voices get us there, but get us there together.

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**Volunteer announcement:**

At the [Committee on Sustainability Assessment](#), volunteering can offer insights and awareness of challenges to agricultural sustainability. Nearly one-seventh of the world's population depends on farming for their livelihoods. They are among the most vulnerable workers or families anywhere; most are small farmers working small plots of land.

We are looking for people who feel as passionate as we do about global sustainability. Volunteers can help in a variety of ways. What is the skill that you can offer? You do not need to be a 'sustainability professional' or 'agricultural specialist'. Maybe your skills are in communication, organizational expertise, or even administrative areas. Contact me and let's see if we can match your skill and desire to help with a need we have. [LS@thecosa.org](mailto:LS@thecosa.org)