



Friends World Committee
for Consultation
WORLD OFFICE

How does God call us to act?

An Online Conference with Friends worldwide (22.02.2020)

A Transcript from Speaker One – Lindsey Fielder Cook

- What part do Quakers play in creating a sustainable future?
 - o Perspective, experience and knowledge
- What is God calling us as Quakers to be and to do?

My name is Lindsey Fielder Cook, and I am the Representative for Climate Change at the Quaker United Nations Office, in Geneva. I have been asked to share my *perspective, experience and knowledge on what part Quakers play in creating a sustainable future, and to ask, what is God calling us, as Quakers, to be and do?*

I can share what I have come to understand, knowing that while each of us has a personal journey with God, we have a shared history and presence as Quakers.

I have come to see ‘sustainability’ as a way of ‘being’ and a way of ‘seeing’ life around me. It has not always been like this. I was raised in the USA, educated and became a Quaker in Britain, and spent my early years in humanitarian work in conflict zones. I did not really think about the environment until my 40s, when I came to see climate change as a peace concern, and returned to graduate school to study. My first assignment was to read an essay by Kenneth Boulding, called ‘The Spaceship Earth’. At the time I didn’t know he was a Quaker, nor that his wife, Elise Boulding, had a profound influence on QUNO. All I knew was that his description of our planet as our spaceship, transformed me. How precious it is, how life-giving, and we were ravaging its natural resources and destabilizing its climate as if they were unlimited and unaffected by our actions.

Since then, the concept of who I am, and what I do, has an ever deeper sense of consequence to include how I live daily, and what I seek from decision makers.

This is not been a simple journey, and I am always learning, often humbled. It was easier when I could point a finger at a dictator or a human rights abuser, but as I learned of our human impact on the earth, and its consequences to the most vulnerable, our children and all future generations, I realised that the finger was pointing to me. That was a powerful moment. I had to look in the mirror, and in doing so, to accept responsibility for my actions. Yet I wanted to do this. I'd been living in Germany, where I learned of the concept 'intergenerational grief'. That of younger generations longing for, but rarely having, a story of their parents or grandparents during WW2. This grief was all around me, and forced me to ask, what is the moral challenge facing my generation, and what is the legacy I am leaving?

I began by dragging our family of four to a more sustainable lifestyle. I became self-righteous, until one day my youngest, then aged 13, widened my sight. She had placed a napkin over food she did not like, and I said, *'honey, that's not normal'*. She turned to me, and with full power said, *'What is normal in this family? We have no car, no clothes dryer, we don't eat meat, you don't eat dairy, we don't fly except for Grandma in America, I cycle to school even in the ice and snow, we get vegetables from a farm rather than a supermarket, we get heating from Greenpeace, we have solar panels, we rent downstairs because you say the house is too big for one family.'* I remember sitting at the table, realizing that my sense of achievement was at times her burden.

We had a family meeting, heard that both children avoided team sports over embarrassment to yet again ask for lifts to events. We bought a third hand car with the promise that we would use it only when cycling was difficult. Today they talk positively about how we try to live, and I sense this in part because we learned not to be fundamentalist. Judgement kills the joy. And that sometimes, the worst judgement is on myself, because though I want to be 'perfect', I am 'imperfect'. We are all part of the brokenness and we can all be part of the rebuilding, the transformation, the story of what we did when we knew.

We Quakers have a history of identifying a moral call for conscience often before our wider human family sees it as such. In history it is easy to look in hindsight, to think something was obviously bad or morally wrong, but at the time, questioning an activity usually faced serious resistance. There are many examples of this in Quaker history, but I often connect the abolition of slavery to facing climate change,

because many of the root causes were, and are, very lucrative activities. Slavery was the foundation of an economic model from which most decision makers benefited. Today, fossil fuels, deforestation, industrial agriculture, and other main drivers of climate change make some people a lot of money. In turn, most of our countries subscribe to an economic system which feeds this destruction.

Right now, global temperature rise, land degradation, ocean acidification, chemical pollution and species extinction, are all happening at rates unprecedented in human history. Many human activities causing one crisis also drive other environmental crises. And time is limited. With climate change, our current greenhouse gas emissions are on track for a global mean temperature rise of 4.8C above preindustrial levels by 2100. That rate of rise is unthinkable - it leads to profound loss of life, nature, and the collapse of human civilization as we know it. And these extremes do not have to happen. They are avoidable. I say this with confidence, because QUNO is, through FWCC, the only faith-based observer at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which gathers the latest climate findings to inform all governments worldwide.

How can we reach hearts and minds to grasp this? Every half degree makes a profound difference, to saving lives, to saving species, to saving the eco-systems on which our human lives depend. And, remarkably, it is still possible, with urgent action, to stabilize temperatures even to 1.5C above preindustrial levels.

What is the legacy we are going to leave?

My work on climate change often involves inter-faith events. And I have been moved to learn that our Quaker concept of 'personal witness alongside political action', is not a 'given' in other communities. Yet for Quakers, not owning slaves was a critical personal witness, but that alone would not change national law. This required political action.

Quakers worldwide give me strength every day. In many countries, Quakers are the forefront of raising awareness in their Meetings and Churches, in their communities, and with their governments. The connections of living sustainably are a peace and justice issue.

How do we understand what God is asking of us? For me, the answers lie in the Bible, and in our Quaker Testimonies. When I read the teachings of Jesus, I read the message of love, the message of

forgiveness, the message of protecting the poorest and most vulnerable, and the warnings over greed. And when I read the Quaker Testimonies, I find the guidance. I cannot underestimate how relevant all these messages are to transforming the root causes driving climate change. Let me explain.

Testimony one - equality – today inequality - the gap between the richest and the poorest - is ever growing. Quakers speak of ‘the right relationship’, and for decades have considered how the economic system can in turn feed the very destruction of the planet on which we depend. To share a statistic: *The global economy is almost five times the size it was half a century ago and has already been accompanied by the degradation of an estimated 60% of the world’s ecosystems.*

Testimony two – justice - inequality feeds an injustice – those with the most unsustainable communities threaten the ability of the most vulnerable communities, our youth and those yet born, to live on this planet. Intergenerational injustice – is acting sufficiently now to ensure the health of our next generations. Let us uphold the justice.

Testimony three – peace - War is too often a political choice, it is not an inevitable. Countries rarely include the greenhouse gas emissions of their military, let alone the destruction and rebuilding required in the devastating wars. Peace builds a future. And peacebuilding, what is often at core in Quaker messages, has a profound contribution to helping communities face rising temperatures and resulting natural resource stress, while avoiding violent conflict as an additional consequence.

Testimony four – truth / integrity. Speak truth to power, Quakers and others often say. What does that mean for sustainability? Talk about what you see happening around you. The climate shifts. The loss of wildlife. The loss of birdsong. The dead rivers. The fields stripped of anything but one crop. Talk about it. Greta Thumberg, the Swedish teenage activist, asked, ‘is anybody listening?’ Denial, self-numbing, or what is sometimes called ‘climate silence’, are some of the greatest mountains we must climb.

Testimony five – simplicity (some add sustainability). In the past we Quakers were always known for this. Our dress, our lifestyles, may be more modern, more integrated, but Quakers inspire me to live ever deeper in sustainably. Just when I think I have done much, a Quaker will remind me, often without words, that my journey has just begun.

I will finish by returning to my personal journey.

I am learning to embrace my imperfection as part of my journey. I can work so hard to live sustainably and then fly across the ocean to visit my mother. I am learning that forgiveness is part of touching the hearts of others, to join the human family seeking to face these challenges.

We are asked to love God with all our heart, mind and soul, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. How do we love, and forgive, at a time, when our very lifestyles, our government policy and economic systems, fuel the destruction of God's Creation, and our neighbor? The word 'sustainability' may seem small, but it is part of our personal witness and our political action, to be on a journey, however bumpy or imperfect, that can leave a legacy, a story for our children and unborn generations that we acted when we could, and that they, in facing the challenges of their time, can and must act when they can. To act with love, and forgiveness, of our imperfection, of those who are still unable to grasp what is happening - do not curse them, help them. To reflect what George Fox shared:

Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you.

Thank you