Transcript of Simon Lamb’s, talk from session one of the
Quaker Conversations webinar series

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What does it mean to be a Quaker today? How is God calling us to give witness?

Good morning, Good afternoon or Good Evening Friends.

The transformational nature of God’s grace is quite simply extraordinary. The fact that you and I are loved unconditionally, for that is what grace is, by the God of all creation is something I often struggle to get my head around.

I marvel in wonder that I, a much less than perfect human being, living in a damaged and broken world is not only surrounded by this Divine grace, but that I can experience personally this grace working its miracle of transformation in me.

Friends have traditionally recognised this inner transformation, this manifestation of the grace of God as being initiated by the ‘Inward light of Christ’ or ‘That of God in everyone’ which has its biblical basis in John 1 v 9.

I suspect some of you are already wondering did you turn up to the wrong talk organised by FWCC. Surely Simon was meant to be talking about the world we are in now and what Quakers can do today, not some theological lecture on early Quaker beliefs.

And yet we Friends have from our very beginning believed that the unconditional love of God is what must drive us out into the world.

As William Penn so aptly put it over 300 years ago ‘True godliness don’t turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it’

In these very unusual times where the global community is not only struggling with a debilitating pandemic which is effecting every one of us through its health, its social and its financial impact, we are also at the same time being challenged by the protests of many on the issues of long-entrenched patterns of cultural, racial and social inequities and the historic colonial values that underpin such ideas.
We are being limited in our capacity to meet each other face to face. Social distancing is becoming a very normal part of our lives in these abnormal times. We are learning new ways to communicate, to socialise, and even to worship.

This period of health crisis for almost every country on this planet and the impending financial disaster that it promises in the months to come for many of the world’s citizens, leaves Friends with the challenging question as to what we are able and what are we called to do.

What are Friends as a whole and FWCC as the primary global body for Friends called to do today?

These are not questions we have just started asking.

Over 40 years ago I attended my first ever FWCC event in Kaimosi, Kenya in August 1982. At it, the keynote address was given by a young pastor and theologian from North West Yearly Meeting in Oregon. In that address Donald A Green challenged us with the following words.

‘I believe that around the world this day there are Friends who earnestly desire a fresh work of the Spirit to be done among us. I am one of them. I believe that we are here because, deep within us all, have been the gentle whisperings of the Spirit that, in fact, our time together is somehow attached to the renewal of our calling as Friends.

We are disenchanted with the fruitlessness of depending on our own wisdom, our own planning, and our own strength!

We are as discontent with retelling stories of our Quaker forebearers’ victories as we are of hearing of their defeats.

We are thirsty and yet there is a timidness in us about holding out our cups……

The transforming power of the love of God is that which seeks to work its purpose in us. It is this that both gives us our thirst, and will satisfy our thirst.’

What Don Green understood back in 1982 was that we the people called Friends are not content to simply accept the state of the world as it is. We understand the need for change, for transformation. We desire to make things better but despite our recognition that change is needed we often hold back because of lack of courage or for fear of what consequences change might bring both for us personally and for society as a whole.

Yet on an individual level this desire drives us to care for neighbours who are in need during this pandemic, to do shopping for the elderly so they can stay safe at home or to do what African Friends are doing in raising money and providing masks and sanitisers for rural communities, clinics and Quaker hospitals across East Africa.

But at a global level what can an organisation like FWCC do? Of course a global body like ours has to tackle things differently from the way individuals might act, and yet we must be
driven just like individual Friends are by the same unconditional love of God that permeates us as individuals.

In the period since the World Conference in Kabarak, Kenya in 2012, FWCC has been moving it focus to a series of priorities that we believe are critical to the future direction of the organisation and which we believe speak to the global calling of Friends.

Probably the clearest and strongest message to come out of Kabarak was a renewed awareness and vigorous burden to do all we can to nourish and preserve God’s glorious creation which has resulted in the establishment of a sustainability worker based in our world office and an active ongoing global dialogue among Friends of all traditions about the critical issues related to climate change and the many ongoing risks to our planet.

Another major strand of concern which has been developing in FWCC in recent years is one that was raised by a Bolivian Young Friend in our Central Executive Committee in Rwanda in 2017. Supported by Kenyan Friends, he challenged the committee to the issue of historical cultural, social and racial attitudes both within and outside the Religious Society of Friends which have resulted both from colonial and general social attitudes which still exist today. He explained the impact such ongoing values have on the attitudes and choices his Friends and friends make in Bolivia.

Out of this personal concern, the Central Executive Committee saw the need to accept the challenge given us to help Friends globally to engage with this issue and in recent years we have been trying to find funding to establish a similar work to the one we have been doing on sustainability in recent years.

The urgency of both these strands of work have become ever more clear to those of us involved in FWCC, as we have watched the unfolding events of the past few months and I feel clear that God is calling us as a global Quaker community to get on with this work helping both the global Friends community and the rest of society to understand the interrelatedness of these various issues.

The idea of a global Quaker community bring me to a third and every bit as critical part of the work of FWCC that I want to mention today.

Ever since I went on a Quaker Youth Pilgrimage as an 18 year old and travelled round the multiple varieties of American Friends tradition, I have been both challenged and inspired by this variety. As a Friend who grew up in the Evangelical unprogrammed tradition of Ulster Quarterly Meeting within the more diverse Ireland Yearly Meeting I was aware of the fact that not only was this diversity challenging and enriching but that most Yearly Meetings or Quaker groups I encountered were by their theological nature imbalanced or lopsided, perhaps even damaged in one way or other. I also realised that only in being compared to the spiritual wellbeing in another Quaker tradition were the theological strengths and weaknesses in my own tradition laid bare.
But more importantly, I realised that only when Friends met and worked together, particularly under the care of FWCC, did Friends theology, testimonies and social witness become revealed in all their full richness and wholeness. Each Yearly Meeting and tradition holds part of the God given message of transformation that early Friend’s brought to the world more than 350 years ago, but I have yet to find any Yearly Meeting that provides the whole. That is why FWCC plays such a vital role in the global community of Friends. By sharing the burden of carrying God’s message to a broken world we not only bring a full message but one that’s worth hearing for that world.

The final point I want to mention is a challenge that many Friends across the globe are facing at this time. It is the issue of End Time theology. During this pandemic, fear has become a strong component in humanity’s thinking and Friends Churches in Africa, Latin America and elsewhere face the challenge from other churches preaching a mixture of fear and quick fix solutions built around the idea of this being the time for Christ’s second coming.

Friends, while we recognise the biblical promise of Christ’s second coming as part of our historical theology, have throughout our history put our emphasis on living our faith and our relationship with the living inward Christ here and now, rather than living in some expectant hope for the future. We see the second coming of Christ as also being revealed in our transformed lives in this moment. Our Quaker belief that we are called to bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth in the here and now is upheld by knowing that the transforming power of the love of God changes lives. God’s kingdom can come if we are but obedient servants.

FWCC is presently exploring the possibility of establishing a theological working group to provide material that might help with theological challenges Friends globally face on such issues.

Can I finish by saying this? Whether you are a homemaker or on the staff of the Quaker United Nations Office in New York or Geneva, whether you are a Yearly Meeting Clerk or studying software design at a university in Bujumbura, whether you are unemployed or like me running a small bakery in Northern Ireland, like early Friends you can experience the transforming power of the grace of God and be used for Divine purposes.

And this brings me back to where I started. John Woolman, one of those many earlier Friend whose thoughts and actions have inspired me throughout my life of faith, wrote in his journal that he was prompted by the Light of Christ within to go and spend some time with the Native American community. To explain all these promptings Woolman simply says ‘Love was the first motion’. Woolman was being challenged to act, driven by the transforming nature of God’s unconditional love.

And we are called to act likewise.